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Second August Number

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SPARKIN' COWBOY.....S. Omar Barker 7
A Western Poem

THE FAR-AWAY KID.....Frank C. Robertson 9
A Complete Novel

OUTLAWED.....Thomas Grant Springer 66
A Rangeland Ballad

ROAD RANCH REBEL.....Cliff Walters 68
A Short Story

FUGITIVES ALL.....Herbert A. Woodbury 77
A Short Story

HUNCH PLAY.....James W. Routh 87
A Novelette

LEATHER LUCK.....L. Lindley Mulkey 109
A Short Story

WIND OVER THE RANGE.....Amos Moore 119
A Serial Novel—Part Two

BITTER WATER.....Allan Cameron 139
A Short Story

OUT OF THE CHUTES.....Tex Sherman 148
The Rodeo Department

THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE..... 152
A Try-Your-Skill Department

OUR AIR MAIL.....The Readers 154
A Speak-Your-Mind Department

TRAIL'S END ROLL CALL..... 159
The Club Page

WHOM SHALL I MARRY?.....Professor Marcus Mari 160
A Horoscope Department

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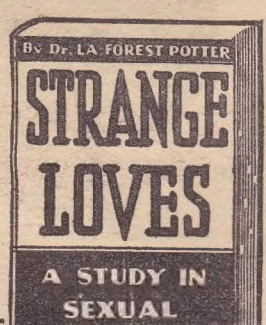

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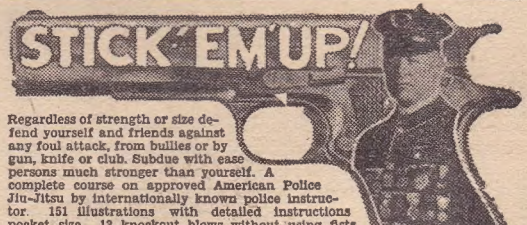

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be able to in a stranger's house," the youthful puncher said vigorously.

Apparently Slammer was in a jovial mood, for he seemed to take no offense. "Me 'n' the leetle gal here ain't strangers," the fellow said. "We cottoned tuh each other right off the bat. Didn't we, cutie?"

The man turned and slipped a possessive arm around the girl's slim waist just as she was putting a skillet on the stove. Blushing and furious, she tried to break away, but the man only laughed and held her fast.

"Let go, Slammer," cried Far-Away curtly.

"All right—when I git a kiss," the burly ruffian laughed. His other hand he cupped under the girl's chin and raised her face upward. His foul breath filled Gale with a deathly nausea as his lips approached hers. But they didn't quite touch.

"Let go, I said," gritted Far-Away.

Gale found herself released as the ruffian straightened with a convulsive jerk. The girl saw that Far-Away's gun barrel was jammed against the other's ribs.

"Why, damn yore soul, have yuh got the guts tuh threaten me?" the man rumbled furiously.

"An' the guts tuh separate yuh from yore rotten soul if yuh paw that girl again," Far-Away said coolly, as he stepped back and holstered his gun.

"So the Far-Away Kid is gettin' too big fer his breeches, eh?" Slammer Burns ground out. "Kinda fergettin' who's runnin' the shebang, ain't yuh?"

"Not for a minute," replied the Far-Away Kid. "But I'm not standin' for this. Makin' this girl cook for us is one thing. Insultin' her is another."

"Who's insultin' anybody?" Slammer snorted. "Won't hurt this nester filly tuh be kinda nice—"

Wham! A smallish fist, hard as a bullet, crashed against the bully's jaw. Slammer went back on his boot heels, and his eyes goggled wildly as he staggered. One of the other men caught and held him up.

"Why, damn yore skinny soul, I've a notion tuh take yuh outside an' wallop yuh till yuh can't see," the ruffian mouthed when he had recovered his power of speech.

"Try it, if yuh feel that way," the Far-Away Kid challenged. "Clover can hold my gun; Hart hold yores."

"Aw, what the hell's the use o' fightin' among friends?" the Slammer asked with a shrug, and seated himself at the table. He massaged his aching jaw tenderly, but there was a cruel, sinister gleam in his eye.

Apparently the affair was over, but Gale was too unstrung to continue her cookery, no matter what the consequences. At the same time she was grateful to the youth who had championed her.

The Far-Away Kid turned toward her with a smile which made his face essentially boyish. Gale even noted that there was a dimple in his cheek. It seemed to denote good humor, but there was nothing effeminate in his hard, bronzed features.

"Show me where I can wash up, an' I'll help yuh cook," he offered.

Gale motioned silently to the wash bench in the lean-to against the kitchen. She could hear him blowing and splashing while he removed the thick coat of trail dust, and as he finished she appeared with a clean towel. He wiped and combed, then took the cooking out of her hands in a masterful way. He asked for what he wanted, and she got it for him. Soon they were talking together, and Gale was feeling almost gay as she set the table.

"Hey, don't put on that clean white table-cloth," he called once. "There's too much grease on the elbows that'll be restin' on it. A horse blanket would be better."

Gale was dying to ask questions, but she didn't dare. These men were different from any she had ever known, for all that they were rangemen and she had been reared on the range. In a sense she was a prisoner in her own

home, for she realized how futile it would have been to refuse them food. They were outlaws.

The Slammer man had no more to say. When the meal was ready he and the other two ate voraciously and silently. The Far-Away Kid had seated himself at one end of the table, and he, at least, ate with restraint.

The meal over the men drew back their chairs and smoked; all except the Far-Away Kid. He asked Gale if there was a late newspaper on the place, and when she brought one that was a week old he read it hungrily until the other men arose and started out.

"Well, come on, Far-Away," Slammer Burns said, "yuh've mopped up enough information tuh do yuh a month. Le's be ridin'."

"Go ahead. I'm goin' tuh help wash up these dishes. I'll overtake yuh."

"So that's yore game, eh?" Slammer Burns blazed. "Want the little honeybunch tuh yoreself after—"

"Don't say it, Slammer, unless yuh wanta shoot it out with me here an' now," the Far-Away Kid cut in ominously. "I'm stayin' tuh wipe the dishes. Nothin' more! Make no mistake about it."

"Aw, what the hell do we care?" grunted the dark man named Hart, who looked to be part Indian. "Come on, Slammer. We been here long enough."

With a grunt Slammer Burns turned and stalked outside, the other two following him.

"You don't need to stay," Gale said in a low tone. "I don't mind doing the dishes."

"Do yuh want me to go?" he asked.

"Why, I—I—don't know," she stammered. "Won't yore friends be angry if you stay behind?"

His boyish face formed a sinister mask which made him look years older. It lasted but a moment, however.

"Oh, never mind them," he said. "The farther ahead they get the better I'll like it."

Soon they were washing dishes side by side. Their hands touched almost every time Gale handed him a dish to wipe, and each time a strange thrill seemed to go through the girl like an electric shock. She was no longer frightened, but filled with a sense of exquisite adventure. In a few minutes she knew that this reckless young outlaw would ride on, out of her life forever. But she was glad that he had come.

"Well," he said at last, "I reckon I'll be driftin' on. I'm sorry we come in on yuh like this, but I can't say I'm sorry I met yuh. Somehow, yo're the kind of girl I always wanted tuh meet."

"Am I?" she breathed.

"God, I'd give—anythin'—if I could stay," he said in a suddenly choked voice.

For a moment they stood looking into each other's eyes, both breathing hard from emotion. Suddenly, with a little cry, he drew her into his arms and pressed a kiss to her lips.

He released her suddenly. "My Gawd," he said in bitter self-abasement, "here I've gone an' done the very thing I wanted tuh kill Slammer for. I won't ask yuh to forgive me."

In that one moment Gale suddenly had changed from a girl to a woman. She felt herself in complete command of the situation. As he turned to go, she called:

"Will you do one thing for me?"

The Far-Away Kid turned around, perplexed. "Of course," he promised. "What is it?"

"Kiss me again," she said softly.

The Far-Away Kid hesitated, then shook his head stubbornly. "No," he said roughly, "I—I can't. I had no business tuh kiss yuh once. Good-by."

Gale stood by the window with a little smile upon her lips and watched him get his horse and ride out of sight.

"Will I ever see him again, I wonder!" she said pensively as she turned away.

Abstractedly she picked up the magazine she had been reading, though

she knew that its pages contained no more thrills for her that day. Her eyes opened wider as they fell upon a clean new five-dollar bill. She knew that the Far-Away Kid had left it there to pay for the meal.

She regarded the crisp greenback musingly. She was too honest to use the money without telling her folks about it, but if she did that she realized that there might be consequences. She would have to tell what had happened, and the information she would give might lead to the capture of the Far-Away Kid. She knew that it was her duty to aid in his capture, but her heart told her she didn't want it to happen. She folded the five-dollar bill neatly and put it into a little box containing her most prized personal possessions.

Her parents returned home just before dark. To her relief they failed to ask if anybody had been there that day. They were more interested in telling about their own trip to town. Gale didn't dare ask questions, but she listened eagerly for any mention of the four outlaws. It came at last.

"I gotta ride over tuh the I N camp after supper," her father said. "There was a bank robbery over in Springdell three days ago, an' the sheriff asked me tuh have the boys be on the lookout for the bandits. There's a rumor they're headin' this way."

Gale said nothing.

CHAPTER II

"What's Ours We'll Hold"

FIVE years passed. The Almond family were on the move. Ira Almond had never been satisfied with the cramped location where he had reared his family. He had never been able to rise above the nester class. There had never been work enough to keep him and his two sons busy all the time. Much of the time Ed and Marve worked for the I N outfit, for they were both skilled cowhands. But when the extra work came on at home and they were away, Gale had to do it. She was almost as good a hand as either of her brothers.

Now Almond had heard of a place where hay land was cheap and the range not all taken. It was six hundred miles from his old location. He had taken a trip there and paid cash for a six-hundred-and-forty-acre ranch with an abundance of free range adjoining. It was a hundred miles from a railroad, but he had decided it was cheaper to ship his stuff as far as he could by rail, and trail the rest of the way, than it would be to sell and buy again.

After he had unloaded the three hundred and fifty head of Bar A cattle at the little town of Sunset, it had taken a couple of days to get ready for the trail. There were forty head of horses as well as the cattle, and three wagonloads of household goods. A considerable amount of ranch machinery would have to be left for another trip.

It was while they were still at Sunset that there came the first intimation that Council Valley might not be the earthly paradise Ira Almond had been led to believe it.

The family had clustered around the campfire after an arduous day, when a couple of the curious-minded denizens of the town approached to gossip.

"So yo're headin' fer Council Valley?" one of them remarked, after their preliminary questions had been answered. "Well, mebbe yuh know what yo're doin'."

Ira Almond looked up quickly. "What's wrong with Council Valley?" he challenged.

"Oh, nothin'," the man replied hastily. "Nothin' at all. Only, I've heard that that big Wineglass cow outfit 'bout runs things tuh suit themselves in there. Fact is, I've heard they've got a strangle holt on everythin', an' they make it tough fer nesters."

"I'm not worried," Almond said.

"I've looked it over an' I know I've got land, water, an' range."

"I hope yo're right, stranger, I shore do," the man said lugubriously, and strolled away.

"Pa, are yuh sure that everythin' is all right?" Mrs. Almond asked anxiously. "I'd hate tuh have anythin' happen, now we've pulled up all our stakes at home."

"Why, nothin' kin happen," Almond laughed. "Think I'd buy a pig in a poke?"

There the matter rested. The next morning the Almonds got under way. A man had been hired to drive one of the four-horse teams. Almond himself drove one, while Gale was supposed to drive the other. The girl could handle the four lines more expertly than either her father or the hired man. But it was tedious riding in the lumbering, slow-going wagon, and Marve drove the team half the time, allowing the girl to help Ed with the cattle. It was the time spent in the saddle which the girl enjoyed.

Gale, now twenty-one, was in love with life. There were hardships to be endured during this trek, but the adventure far outweighed them. It was the second big adventure of her life. The first had occurred that long ago afternoon when the Springdell bank robbers had compelled her to cook their dinner.

She had never forgotten that wild, ecstatic moment when the Far-Away Kid had kissed her. Other handsome young men had paid her attention since that time, but somehow their advances had left her cold. She often wondered with a vague, half-amused feeling, if she would ever see him again.

For weeks she had listened anxiously for some word that the bank bandits had been caught. But apparently they never were, for she heard no account of it, and saw nothing about it in the weekly county newspaper which her father took. That, of itself, meant little, for the paper printed little but local news, and Springdell was a considerable distance away.

Once she had casually inquired of her father if he had ever heard anything about the men being caught.

"Guess they got clean, slick away," he told her carelessly. "I never heard of 'em bein' caught. Anyway, I reckon they didn't come through this way, for I never heard o' nobody who seen 'em."

It was too late to say anything then, even had Gale been so minded. But many times during those five years she had taken out that crisp, new five-dollar bill and smoothed it thoughtfully.

The fourth day of their trek from Sunset the Almond wagon train entered the upper end of Council Valley. It was a rough, broken-up country with hills abounding in grass, except down the center of the valley where a small, crooked river meandered its way through acres of willow swamps and wild hay meadows.

"Our ranch lays about eighteen or twenty miles on down the river," Almond explained pridefully. "It's back off the river about four miles in a sort of basin. That big Wineglass outfit that that feller yipped about the other evenin' controls all the land along the river bottom, but we're well above 'em an' got water rights on Clevis Creek."

That afternoon while Gale was pushing up the tail end of the trail-weary cattle herd, she was overtaken by two riders. She wore chaps over her riding breeches, and her flannel shirt and pearl-gray sombrero made her look like a boy. The silk bandanna she wore around her throat to keep out the dust also covered her short, brown curls.

"What's this, another damn nester outfit tuh be run outa the country?" one of the riders asked the other in a loud voice that was obviously for her benefit.

"This is a fine range country, but I never picked a rose yet that didn't have bugs on it," the other said.

"An' cabbages have lice," the other laughed. "Hey, kid, where do yuh

think yo're goin' with these dogies?"

Gale turned her horse so as to face them. "Just what is it to you?" she demanded.

"Great squawk! It's a girl," the puncher said, awkwardly touching the rim of his hat.

The other puncher, however, had been busy lassoing a tired calf for no good reason whatever. If he had expected the calf to buck and bawl, he was mistaken. It was almost given out anyway, and it quietly laid down.

"Will you take your rope off that calf?" Gale demanded icily.

"Why, I—I— Git down an' tie it loose, Lusty," the roper stammered.

"Tie it loose yoreself," his companion retorted.

At that moment Ed Almond rode up. Six years older than Gale, he had spent most of his working years riding for a big cow outfit. He wasn't disposed to acknowledge inferiority to these fresh cowpunchers.

"What's goin' on here?" he demanded angrily. "What's the idee in ropin' that lame calf?"

"Just wanted tuh make shore what the brand was," the man who had roped it replied with an insolent grin.

"Yeah? That brand was put on less'n two weeks ago. It can be read without glasses or a rope," Ed said. "Yuh'd better take it off—*pronto.*"

The roper was holding his coils easily in his left hand. Now his right dropped to the handle of his gun. "Look here, nester," he said ominously, "yuh don't know whose toes yo're treadin' on. This is Wineglass country. Any time a lousy nester outfit trails through, we cut their herd any time an' any place we see fit. *Sabbe?*"

"Yuh'll not monkey with this bunch, stranger," Ed Almond rasped, his hand hovering over his gun.

"Ed, don't!" Gale screamed. If guns were called into play her brother would stand no chance against two foes. Gale herself had no gun. But Ed paid no heed. He and the man with the rope sat glaring at each other, both ready for a swift draw if the other moved. Then the man who had been called Lusty spurred forward.

"Drop it, Finn," he commanded crisply. "These people are right. Yuh had no business ropin' a lame calf—yuh'd orta picked out a husky yearlin'." The last remark was accompanied by a laugh by which he hoped to relieve the tension. At the same time he swung down gracefully and removed his companion's rope from the calf. He lifted the animal to its feet, and it staggered on after the herd.

The man Finn slowly coiled in his twine. "Yuh nesters aimin' tuh plant yoreselves in here?" he demanded.

"That's our business, stranger," Ed answered.

"I wouldn't be too sure," Finn retorted. "Yore kind ain't wanted in here. I'm guessin' yo're the outfit that's tuk over the Gammon layout. If yuh are, yo're jest in for a-plenty trouble. We cleaned the Gammons out, an' I reckon we kin clean you."

"Aw, dry up, Finn," urged Lusty. "There's a lady present."

"Come on, we've got to report this tuh the manager." Finn growled, spurring his horse.

Lusty raised his hat as he followed his companion. "I'll be seein' yuh," he grinned at Gale.

"Ed," Gale breathed, "do you suppose Dad went an'—an'—"

"Looks like it," Ed said. "Another one of his blunders. But it'll take more'n a few blusterin' punchers tuh bluff us out. We've got a legal right, an' what's ours we'll hold." Then he rode ahead to consult with his father.

Gale rode on behind the herd, urging on the discouraged calf with little flips of her *romal.* Knowing her father as she did, she feared that he had bought into trouble. He was the kind of man who could always see what he wanted to see, whether it existed or not, and shut his eyes to unpleasant realities. For her the salt of adventure had suddenly lost its savor.

That night the little herd was bedded down in the mouth of an arroyo only a few miles from their destination. Camp was made just below on a small creek. The talk was all of the encounter with the two punchers, but Ira Almond poohpoohed the idea that there could be any serious trouble.

Although the Bar A cattle were good grade Hereford stuff, they were range cattle and wild. But rounding them up, moving them on the cars, and the subsequent trailing had gentled them somewhat. It wasn't thought necessary to set a night guard. The Almond boys were light sleepers. If the cattle started to move out of the arroyo, they would hear them. Only a single night horse was kept up.

It was Gale, however, who first sensed that there might be something wrong.

Just what had aroused her she didn't know, but she hadn't been sleeping soundly. She listened for several minutes, and though nothing seemed amiss she finally went to the door of the tent which she and her mother occupied. The men were sleeping under the wagons. The night horse had been staked just below the camp. Gale listened for the animal, and didn't hear it.

"Oh, Ed!" she called softly.

Her brother promptly rolled out from under the wagon. He had taken off only his boots. "What is it?" he asked.

"The night horse. I don't see it."

"By Gawd, he's gone. Musta pulled his picket pin," Ed said, and reached for his boots. At that moment a curtain of fire suddenly pierced the darkness in the arroyo. It was a single puff of high-leaping powder flame, but to Gale and Ed it revealed the little herd of whitefaces getting to their feet as a single animal.

At the same instant there came a chorus of ungodly yells, accompanied by the crack of sixguns blazing orange streaks across an inky sky. Mingled with the shots and yells were the thunder of hoofs, the crackling of brush, and the terrified snorts of the stampeded cattle as they galloped out of the arroyo mouth and lumbered across the flat.

"Everybody out!" Ed yelled, but his words were unnecessary. The other men were scrambling wildly for boots and breeches.

Cursing bitterly, Ed dragged on his boots and reached for his gun. He ran out toward the cattle, but he couldn't have headed them had he been able to reach them. The men behind the stampede were but vague blurs, identifiable only by the flash of their guns, and they were mingled with the tail end of the herd. Ed emptied his sixgun above the backs of the cattle, but even had he been able to see his targets clearly he couldn't have hit them because of the distance.

The others rushed out, guns in hand. Meanwhile the stampede was already out of range. Fuming like a wild man, Ed returned to the camp.

"Well, it didn't take them fellers long tuh git back at yuh, did it?" ventured the hired man.

"Just wait till I see them two again," Ed gritted.

"Is there anythin' we kin do, boys?" Ira Almond asked plaintively.

"Not a damn thing till mornin'," Ed snapped. "We shore can't outrun them cattle afoot, an' it's too dark tuh look for the horses."

"Ed, do yuh think we'll ever get the cattle back?" Mrs. Almond quavered.

"Git 'em back? Of course. They can't just ride up an' steal a bunch like that," Ed said. "Just givin' us trouble; that's their game. Tryin' tuh show us beforehand what we'll be up against if we locate here."

"But we can't do anything else," Almond protested. "All our money is tied up in that ranch."

"We won't try tuh do anythin' else, Dad," Ed said grimly. "No damned cow outfit kin scare me. Here we stick."

"Oh, I wish we'd never sold out on

the Portneuf," Mrs. Almond moaned.

"It'll be all right, Mother," Gale consoled. "No doubt the owners of this Wineglass outfit have suffered from rustlers. When they find out we're on the level, they'll be all right."

"Now yo're talkin', Sis," Marve said. "Yo're allus the one with the level head. Let's go back tuh bed an' wait for daylight."

In the morning all that remained in sight of the Almond herd was a single, solitary animal, the mournful calf which the man Finn had roped the preceding afternoon.

The horses were driven into the camp with some little difficulty by the men on foot, but the night horse, with Ed's saddle on it, wasn't recovered. Ed promptly confiscated Gale's saddle, and the four men set out on the trail of the missing cattle. The two women were left at the camp.

Gale wasn't the least satisfied with the arrangement. No sooner had the men left than she got on her private pony, a chunky little brown she called Toppy, and rode down the road. She had gone but a couple of miles before she saw that an uneven, brushy country lay ahead, where a large creek emerged from the mountains on the east. She saw Marve above her and waved to him. He rode down.

"What do you think?" she asked anxiously.

"I think we're in for a hell of a time," he replied bluntly. "There's a few stragglers along, but the main herd has got into that rough country, an' it's already full o' range cattle."

"Then we'll have to stage a round-up to get them all back, won't we?"

"Looks like it."

"And won't this Wineglass outfit object?"

"They're shore to," Marve said positively.

"Marve, have you got any idea where their headquarters ranch is located?" she asked.

"Yes. Dad pointed it out when we was up on the ridge. It's about eight or ten miles below here on the river. An' our place is due west of here across the river. Why?"

"Because I'm going down there to see those people."

"Gosh, Gale, yuh can't do that," he protested. "An' what good would it do?"

"I can demand that they help us get our cattle back, because they caused the stampede," she said. "I can talk to them better than either Dad or Ed."

"Wouldn't do no good no matter who talked to 'em," Marve said pessimistically.

"I'm going to try it just the same," she averred.

"Well, then, take my saddle," he offered.

"No; you'll need it worse than I will. I'm used to riding bareback, anyway," she refused.

An hour later Gale drew rein in front of a long, high ranch house and a set of outbuildings which testified that the Wineglass was indeed a big and mighty outfit. She felt very small and ineffective as she slid off her pony. She feared that she would be laughed at.

Toppy had sweat considerably and the legs of the girl's riding breeches were damp. Moreover, a lot of Toppy's brown hairs had stuck to the cloth. She tried to brush them off, but without much success. Then, happening to glance toward a corral, she saw Ed's night horse there with several other animals. The saddle was still upon its back. The sight caused the girl to forget her timidity. A rosy flush of anger reddened her cheeks. No matter how big this outfit was, she would tell them just what she thought about them.

She stiffened suddenly as a voice spoke from just behind her.

"Hello there," it said. "What can I do for yuh?"

The voice was pleasant enough, but Gale didn't directly turn around. There was something about it which stirred her memory like a forgotten

echo. She turned slowly, wonderingly, and gazed straight at the man who had just stepped out of a blacksmith shop close by. His quietly amused smile made the girl furious, but she knew him. He was older, of course, and his frame had filled considerably, but his features had scarcely altered during the past five years.

It was the Far-Away Kid.

CHAPTER III

Gale Exacts a Promise

AMAZEMENT held Gale Almond speechless for a moment. Her eyes searched the man's face, and she knew that she wasn't mistaken as to his identity. She waited for some exclamation of astonishment from him, but none came. Then it dawned upon her that he didn't recognize her. Even at that moment she was indignant that he could have ever forgotten her—after that one electric kiss.

"I say—can I do anythin' for yuh?" he repeated.

"Yes. You can tell me where I can find the manager of the ranch," she said caustically.

"Well, now, I'm sorry, miss, but Mr. Jacobs, the manager, isn't here today. He's down at Blazedale, an' I'm afraid he won't be back till tomorrow. But mebbe I can help yuh out."

"I want to see somebody in authority around here," she said coldly.

The Far-Away Kid shrugged. "I reckon then I'm about the only one yuh'll be able tuh see today," he said modestly. "Yuh see, I happen tuh be foreman."

Gale managed to conceal the amazement which this calm declaration gave her. The Far-Away Kid, bank robber, foreman of the biggest cow outfit in the country! No wonder the outfit was lawless. Suddenly she became perfectly self-possessed, and a grim little smile curved the corners of her mouth. If the Far-Away Kid was the foreman here, then the Wineglass outfit would make amends for the stampede or a certain bank bandit would find himself behind bars. For the present, however, she wasn't going to blurt out any accusations. It wasn't wise, she knew, to tell everything.

"I see," she stated coldly, "that you have collected my brother's horse and saddle."

He seemed enlightened. "Oh, that. Now I begin to understand yo're grouch, and I hate tuh see purty girls wearin' grouches. The horse was in our pasture this morning, so we just drove him in an' left him in the corral. Do yuh know how it happened tuh be there?"

"I'll say I do," she flared. "And so do you. But it wasn't the horse I came to see you about."

"No? I'm afraid I don't understand. An' I certainly ain't got the slightest idee how that horse come tuh be in our pasture. There's a good fence, an' the gate was shut. Somebody turned him in."

"And I suppose you don't know who stampeded our cattle and drove them off last night?"

"I certainly don't. With all apologies, I didn't know yuh had any cattle. And I didn't know that yuh were within a thousand miles of here."

"Oh, yes, you did," she retorted quickly, but naturally he didn't get her meaning. "There's no use for you to bluff this thing out. You and your men came to our camp last night an' stole that horse so we'd be left on foot till morning. Then you poured a line of black powder on the ground and set fire to it, knowing that the flash would start a stampede. And then you drove the cattle on and scattered them."

"I'm afraid yuh've made a mistake an' come tuh the wrong place," he said, his lean, bronzed face beginning to harden. "If anythin' like that happened tuh you, I know nothin' about it."

"I expected you'd deny it," she sighed. "I suppose you'll deny that

two of your men, fellows who call themselves Finn and Lusty, made threats against us yesterday."

"Oh! So yo're *that* outfit," he said. "Yes, the boys did tell me about seein' a—a—small outfit trailin' through the country. Did they make threats?"

"Yes, they did—and we're not trailing through the country. We're stopping right here."

"I wish yuh wouldn't," the Far-Away Kid said almost sadly. "It's goin' to be tough for yuh."

"And it'll be tough for somebody else if we don't get our cattle back, and aren't left alone," Gale said angrily. "They have jails for people like you."

The Far-Away Kid looked up quickly. For a moment his keen gray eyes searched her face with a puzzled frown. But recognition didn't come. After all, he had seen her only once, and she had really been only a kid at the time. She was much more mature now, dressed differently, and met in entirely different circumstances. She had had long hair then; now it was neatly bobbed. She realized that he couldn't be expected to recognize her, even if she hadn't slipped entirely from his memory. She meant not to be in too big a hurry to remind him.

"I hope yuh ain't come in here just tuh start a fight," he said with a suggestion of a grin.

"No; but we'll fight if we have to," she retorted. "You can't pull things like you did last night and expect to get away with it."

The Far-Away Kid's face sobered instantly. "Let's me an' you have a little talk," he suggested. "Won't yuh come in?"

"No, thanks," she refused. "This'll be all right out here."

He looked around him, and then motioned to a pile of dead pine logs which had been hauled from the canyons the previous winter for firewood.

"Anyway, have a seat," he invited.

Gale walked over and sat down upon a log. He seated himself upon another log a few feet distant. "Yuh say yore cattle were stampeded last night?" he queried.

"Need you ask that?" she demanded grimly.

"At least I didn't know until yuh told me," he insisted. "My men had nothin' tuh do with it."

"You ask me to believe that—with my brother's horse standing right there? And your two men did make threats. They said we wouldn't be allowed to keep the ranch my father bought, or implied as much."

"And I'm afraid it's true," the Far-Away Kid said. "Yuh see, I'm not the boss here. The owners of this outfit care for nothin' but profits, and the manager, Pat Jacobs, is out to get it for them. The Wineglass has suffered a lot from rustlers. One of the worst outfits we had to contend with was the Gammons."

"We're not rustlers," Gale said hotly.

"Of course not. But, yuh see, the Gammon ranch is practically worthless for all purposes except to plague the Wineglass. For that reason Mr. Jacobs is determined that nobody else can locate there."

"Worthless? My father paid eighteen thousand dollars cash for it."

"Then he must have been gyped," the Far-Away Kid said bluntly. "But I'll tell yuh what I'll do: I'll use what little influence I've got to get Jacobs tuh pay yore father what he gave for it."

The proposal seemed to Gale to be almost an insult. "We're not interested in selling," she declared. "What I want to know, and I want to know it now, is whether or not you're going to help us gather the cattle you scattered."

"Any idee where they are now?" he asked.

"They're undoubtedly scattered along the foothills on the other side of the river, and mixed with your cattle in the brush along that big creek."

"Yes, I suppose they would be," he agreed. "Rustlers would hardly dare drive them up Lookin'-Glass Canyon this time of the year, though it has been done." He got to his feet with a lithe, effortless motion.

"Thanks for comin' here tuh let me know," he said. "I hope the rustlers are tryin' tuh drive yore cattle away, because if they are, we'll ketch 'em before they git over the top. But I doubt that. Anyway, we'll git yore cattle back. Most of my riders left here an hour ago, but I can overhaul 'em. We'll try tuh overtake the rustlers first, but if we can't git 'em, you tell yore folks we'll help 'em round up tomorrow."

He was heading for the corrals, and Gale followed him. She was sure that his talk of rustlers was a blind; for all she knew he might be stalling just in order to harass the Almond's cattle still more. But, somehow, his promise seemed to ring true.

"All we're interested in is getting our cattle back," she said, as she trailed along behind.

"And yuh'll git 'em," the Far-Away Kid said without looking around. "But you won't be able to hold the Gammon ranch. Shall I change the saddle from yore brother's horse tuh yore pony?"

"I'm not helpless," she refused. "If your men have an hour's start, you haven't any time to lose."

"Right," he said. "By the way, what did yuh say yore name was?"

"It's Almond," she said. "My father's name is Ira Almond."

He looked around with his boyish grin. "It's not yore father's handle I want to know. What's yore name?"

"Gale," she said, and blushed to think he had gotten it out of her.

"Nice name," he smiled. "I'll remember that."

Gale wondered if he would. She caught Ed's horse and led it out of the corral just as the Far-Away Kid emerged from the stable leading a mean-eyed, raw-boned appaloosa whose corded muscles looked as tough as woven steel wires. He seized the cheek-strap of the bridle in his left hand, twisted the stirrup with his right and toed into it as the appaloosa made a sudden plunge to avoid being mounted. Man and horse went into the air side by side, but the Far-Away Kid was in the saddle when the horse came down.

Five years before Gale had noticed how small yet strong-looking his hands were. She marveled now at the masterful way he curbed his vicious mount. He was apparently unaware that the appaloosa was cutting up as he looked down at the girl.

"I've got just one favor tuh ask," he remarked. "Kindly ask yore folks not tuh try gatherin' everythin' on Lookin'-Glass Creek today. We'll do the job for 'em tomorrow."

Without waiting for her to reply, he loosened the reins enough to give his mount a chance to unkink. The animal made two prodigious jumps which didn't even loosen the rider in his saddle, and then hit an easy lope. In three minutes horse and rider were out of sight.

Slowly Gale changed the saddle from one horse to the other, deliberated a moment as to the necessity for shortening the stirrups, decided not to bother, and swung onto Toppy. She stuck her toes into the leather above the stirrup, found that they made satisfactory substitutes for the time being, and rode away.

She was both piqued and curious. She secretly resented his failure to recognize her, even while her common sense told her that it was almost impossible that he should. She had more reason to remember him, and he had changed far less than she had. She wondered what his reaction would be when he found out that she knew what he had been. She felt that it would have done far more to insure the return of the cattle had she told him what she knew, but she couldn't deny herself the opportunity of seeing whether he would return them without pressure.

It was an hour later when she encountered her father and the hired man riding the brush along Looking-Glass Creek.

"What're yuh doin' here? Where'd yuh git Ed's horse?" her father demanded.

"I found the horse down at the Wineglass headquarters ranch, and thought I'd better bring Ed his saddle," she informed. "Have you found any of the cattle?"

"Some," he replied moodily. "We've rounded up mebbe seventy-five head, but the rest seemed to be scattered from hell tuh breakfast."

Gale breathed a sigh of relief. At least the herd hadn't been rustled. She didn't believe the Far-Away Kid's denial that his outfit was the one that had stampeded the cattle. Probably it was intended as a warning of worse annoyances to come, if her family remained in the valley. She still had her hole card to play, but there was no use to advertise the fact. She was secretly pleased to know that she held a club which she could use against the Far-Away Kid when necessary, but in the back of her mind was a fear that sending him to the penitentiary wouldn't solve the difficulty. No doubt the whole Wineglass outfit was crooked.

And, when she thought about it, she suddenly realized that she didn't want to send the Far-Away Kid to the penitentiary, no matter what he had done. His, she sensed instinctively, was a free soul. Incarcerated behind prison bars, he would eat his heart out and die. It was not for her to be the instrument of his destruction unless circumstances beyond her control compelled her to use her knowledge.

"Father," she said earnestly, "I had a talk with the foreman of the Wineglass. He denies that his outfit had anything to do with this. Blames it on rustlers. He's promised tuh help us round up everything if you'll wait until tomorrow."

"Yeah? Well, I don't know. This looks like spite work. Been rustlers, we wouldn't have found any. If we wait another day they'll be just that much harder tuh find."

"Please give them a chance," she begged. "We'll have to keep on good terms with that outfit if we stay. Let's meet them in good faith even if we do think they mean trouble. Then, if things do go wrong, it won't be our fault."

"Yuh got a good head on yuh, Gale," her father admitted. "Mebbe yo're right, but it'll be hard tuh make Marve an' Ed see it. We'll try it, though. You go on back tuh camp with Luther here, an' start packin'. We'll git our wagons moved tuh the ranch while we're waitin', anyway."

CHAPTER IV

Varmints in the Brush

IN a timbered draw, surrounded by tall quaking aspens, six men sat around a small, almost smokeless fire, finishing a breakfast of flapjacks, bacon, and coffee. Tin plates were thrown carelessly in a pile as one by one the men finished eating and rolled their after-breakfast cigarettes.

The leader was the last man to finish. He was a huge, black-bearded man of about forty-eight, with the bull neck and mighty torso of a wrestler. He ate like a pig, but his outdoor life had kept him in wonderful physical condition. Indeed, they were all tough-looking, physically and morally. They were dressed like cowhands, but their ungroomed appearance and the sly furtiveness of their manner indicated plainly that they were men on the dodge.

"Better finish that smoke in a hurry, Lucas, an' go up an' let Bill Clover come in an' eat," the leader ordered. "Keep a sharp lookout, too. Things orta be stirrin' purty soon."

"All right, Slammer," the man addressed replied as he got to his feet and slouched away through the trees. The outlaws' horses were staked close at hand, in a place where they couldn't

be seen unless somebody happened to blunder upon them. That was not likely, for the outlaws were camped high up the side of a mountain where they could look down upon Looking-Glass Creek with no danger of being seen.

"Think it's plumb wisdom, stickin' here all day, Slammer?" a red-headed, impatient-looking outlaw inquired. "No tellin' where these nester pilgrims may think o' lookin' for cows. One of 'em might even climb the mountain just tuh see what's on the other side, like the bear did."

"'An' the other side o' the mountain was all that he could see,'" parroted a dark outlaw, who was certainly at least a quarter-breed Indian. His name was Walt Hart.

"No danger," Slammer Burns said. "And if they should climb the ridge the lookout would see 'em. All we need tuh do is lay low."

"Mebbe so," the red-headed one said discontentedly, "but I don't see the idee o' this move, anyway. We could 'a' dropped out the tail-enders o' that bunch, an' been two-thirds o' the way tuh Lookin'-Glass Prairie with at least two hundred head o' good cattle right now, if we'd kept goin'."

"Yuh'll ram yore head square into the penitentiary some time, Red, because yuh can't see a foot from yore nose," the leader said.

Red was disposed to argue. "But why throw all that money away just because we happened on 'em accidental? Hell, them nesters never would ketch us. While they're roundin' up the dogies we'd leave behind, we'd be gittin' clear away."

"Yuh never kin tell what even nesters will do," said the quarter-breed. "Now the nesters will blame the Wineglass fer stampedin' their stuff, an' we know the Wineglass will raise hell with the nesters fer settlin' on the Gammon place. As long as the nesters kin hold out, we can run off Wineglass cattle an' the nesters'll be blamed."

"That may be right, Hart, but I like my profits quick," Red Mulcahy stated. "You an' Slammer an' Bill Clover are hell bent tuh git back at the Far-Away Kid, but yore grudge don't mean nothin' tuh the rest of us."

"The hell it don't," Slammer Burns roared. "Ain't Mick Finn an' Lusty Williams our men? We find out everythin' that goes on, an' some day the Wineglass'll tumble that we've got spies planted. An' when they do, who'll take the rap? Will it be Mick Finn or Williams? It will not. It'll be the Far-Away Kid. All we need do is tip Jacobs off tuh the fact that his nice foreman, Larry Evans, is the Far-Away Kid. An' then, damn him, I'll see him sweat."

"Kinda hate that guy, don't yuh, Slammer?" grinned a slim, white-headed young outlaw.

"So'd you hate him if he'd double-crossed you the way he did us," the Slammer gritted.

"An' yuh can't git back at him without givin' yoreselves away," laughed the sardonic Red.

"I'll git back at him, all right," Slammer Burns declared viciously. "Five years I've been lookin' fer that skunk, an' when I do find him, he's way up yonder sittin' purty as a foreman on a big cow outfit. Well, the higher he's up the farther he'll fall."

"What's his game anyway, Slammer?" Whitey Furniss asked. "Don't tell me a guy with the reputation of the Far-Away Kid is bein' satisfied with a job that can't pay him more'n a hundred dollars a month at most. If he was smart enough tuh lift twelve thousand smackers from you three tough hombres, he ain't holdin' down no piker job fer the fun of it."

"He's after somethin'—make no mistake about it," the Slammer agreed. "That's why I'm minded tuh kinda hang around an' see what it is. When he gits ready fer the clean-up is when we'll step in."

"Yuh may be right, but waitin' around ain't my game," Red Mulcahy declared.

"If our ways ain't suitin' yuh, there's nobody holdin' yuh," Slammer Burns rasped angrily. Red lapsed into sullen silence.

An hour or so later the man Lucas returned from his lookout post. "The nesters air ridin'," he reported laughingly.

"Better all git out where we kin kinda keep an eye on things," Slammer ordered. Thereupon the entire crew of outlaws perched themselves behind safe places of concealment and gazed down upon the hard-riding Almond outfit with the gloating satisfaction of a pack of freshly fed wolves.

They didn't see Gale ride to the Wineglass ranch, but toward the middle of the forenoon they saw part of the crew they had been watching apparently giving up the attempt to gather the cattle and start back. Two of them, however, continued on. One turned up Looking-Glass Creek, while the other rode on down the river. Apparently their object was to determine how far any of their cattle had been driven, rather than to attempt to round them up.

Perhaps an hour after that a posse of fifteen or sixteen riders suddenly appeared from the Wineglass ranch, riding hard up the canyon. Slammer Burns watched them through a pair of field-glasses until they disappeared from sight in the timber which lined the creek. There was an evil, dour smile upon the outlaw leader's face as he turned toward Red Mulcahy.

"That's the Far-Away Kid on lead," he said. "No matter what else he is, he's a lead slinger when he gits riled. If we'd done like you wanted, they'd have been on our tails before sundown. We'd lost the cattle an' had a fight that would have been onhealthy fer somebody."

Red Mulcahy was compelled to acknowledge the wisdom of his leader's tactics.

"Come dark we'll head fer our hangout in Hatcher's Hole," the Slammer decreed. "Soon as them nesters git settled, we'll git busy."

SOMETIME after that Ed Almond stopped his horse and looked around. He was far up Looking-Glass Creek then, and he realized that no large body of cattle had been driven that way recently. Little bunches of wild cattle, wearing the small Wineglass brand upon their left ribs, occasionally broke from the brush and galloped away to some distant open place where, with their tails curled over their backs, they turned to watch him.

He was rather a serious-minded man, and the thought that the cattle had been stampeded merely as a prank made him angrier than if they had been really stolen. He had little faith in the promise that had been made to Gale, but the difficulties involved in gathering up the bunch unaided were so obvious that he had reluctantly consented to wait and give the Wineglass a chance.

Presently he turned back down the most prominent trail, and inevitably he met the Wineglass men coming up. He was quick to recognize the two men with whom he had quarreled the day before.

The trail happened to be narrow at that point and the Wineglass men were riding single file. The Far-Away Kid was on lead. When they stopped, his horse and Ed's were standing nose to nose.

"Hello," the Far-Away Kid greeted. He had more than a suspicion whom he was talking to; the other man was riding a stock saddle, but it was a small one, such as a girl might use. It had a fourteen-inch fork instead of the usual sixteen-inch swell fork which most punchers prefer. He noted, too, that the stirrups had been recently let out.

"Are you fellers from the Wineglass outfit?" Ed challenged.

"Yes, we are," the Far-Away Kid answered pleasantly. "I'm Larry Evans, the foreman."

"Yo're the feller then, I take it, who give the orders tuh stampede our cattle last night," Ed said coldly.

"Then yuh take it wrong, brother," the Far-Away Kid said, a noticeable edge of frost tingeing his voice. "On the contrary I knew nothin' about it until a girl—yore sister I'm guessin'—told me about it. As a matter of fact we're on our way now tuh try tuh overhaul the rustlers, if they've gone this way."

"They ain't gone this way, an' personally I don't take any stock in this rustlin' story—unless you fellers can qualify," Ed said coldly.

"By Gawd, is that nester accusin' us o' bein' rustlers?" a gray-mustached veteran shouted angrily. "If he is—"

"Shut up, Hutch," the Far-Away Kid snapped. "I guess we can't blame yuh for feelin' sore," he said to Ed, "but yuh've no call tuh be accusin' us. As a matter of fact I intend tuh throw my whole crew over here tomorrow an' help yuh round up every critter yuh lost."

"Mebbe so," Ed said skeptically. "But we was threatened yesterday by a man I see in yore party. Yo're a big outfit; we're a little one. But if yuh think yuh kin bluff us in any way, yo're barkin' up the wrong tree."

"Ask him what the hell his lousy nester outfit is doin' in here if it ain't tuh run off Wineglass cattle," yelled Mick Finn. "Everybody knows the Gammons were rustlers, an' that place they owned ain't no good fer any other purpose."

Ed Almond's blood-shot eyes narrowed. No worse anathema could be heaped upon a range man than to call him rustler. Even with the odds fifteen to one against him he dropped his hand to his gun.

"Anybody who says we're rustlers is a liar," he gritted.

"Easy, stranger," the Far-Away Kid said steadily. "I can't let yuh pull a gun on my men. Finn, yuh keep yore mouth outa this. From what Lusty told me, you was purty much responsible for this man thinkin' as he does."

Ed hesitated, his hand upon the handle of his gun. The Far-Away Kid's hands were folded on top of the saddle horn. His whole pose was negligent, but somehow Ed perceived that it would be a very foolish thing even to attempt to draw against him. But Mick Finn wasn't minded to meekly accept the rebuke.

"Responsibility, hell!" he raved. "Ain't we had orders tuh see that no more nesters located in Council Valley—'specially on the Gammon ranch? What was I doin' except carryin' out orders?"

"So that's it, huh?" Ed remarked angrily. "Just thought yuh'd throw a scare into us, then help us gather up our cattle an' tell us tuh move on. Well, we're not movin' on. An' we don't want yore damned help collectin' our stuff."

"Don't let 'em go tuh chasin' our stuff around collectin' their cussed dogies, Larry," called out the old puncher known as Hutch.

"Try an' stop us," Ed challenged.

"We will," the Far-Away Kid accepted the challenge. "Boys, turn around an' we'll start combin' the brush for this Bar A stuff right now. We'll have it bunched for yuh before sundown."

"If them damn rustlers had only drove 'em off, it'd saved us a lot o' trouble," a puncher murmured.

"Again I'm tellin' yuh we don't want yore help," Ed said furiously. He fully believed that if the Wineglass men did keep their promise, the cattle would be abused.

However, the Wineglass men were turning back. One by one they whirled their horses about on the narrow trail, which was just wide enough to permit a horse to spin on its hind legs. Soon only the Far-Away Kid was headed toward Ed.

"I can answer for the safe delivery of yore cattle only if yuh don't try tuh interfere," the Wineglass foreman said. "My boss is determined tuh use

rough tactics against nesters, and the men know it. But I'll answer personally for this round-up today, if yuh give me a free hand."

For a moment the two men measured each other, and the will of the younger one dominated.

"Go ahead then," Ed said grudgingly. "But git this: We mean tuh stick up for our rights."

The Far-Away Kid suddenly touched his mount with the spurs, and neck-reined it to the left. The animal spun. For an instant its forefeet were far over the edge of the trail; then it came down facing the other way.

Seething with anger, Ed Almond sat watching the men ride out of sight. It seemed to him there had been studied contempt in the way the Wineglass foreman had turned his back upon him. Presently he followed the others down the canyon, but when he neared its mouth he veered off and rode to the top of a ridge from which he could view some of the activities of the Wineglass men as they gathered the cattle. It so happened that this ridge was just below the one from which the Slammer Burns gang watched.

"Say, Slammer," remarked Hart, the quarter-breed, "I'll bet yuh four-bits I kin put a rifle bullet right between that hombre's shoulder-blades. If the Far-Away Kid has convinced him that the Wineglass didn't stampede his cattle, he won't be able tuh convince the feller's folks that him or some of his bunch didn't plug him."

"H'm," the Slammer mused, "not a bad idee, but I think I know a better one. An' no danger o' somebody hearin' a shot."

The outlaw leader waited until the Wineglass men were far below. Then he mounted his horse, made his way down to the creek, described a half-circle and approached the top of the ridge where Ed waited, as though he had come down the river.

Burns made no effort to conceal his movements. If seen by any of the Wineglass men, he was sure they would think he was another one of the nesters. He waved a hand in token of greeting while yet some distance from Ed.

"Howdy, stranger," he called cheerfully. "Saw yuh settin' up here like a statoo o' Paul Revere, an' thought I'd see why yuh wasn't ridin'."

"Yes? An' who are you?" Ed challenged.

"My name's Bennett. Got a li'l' ranch over the other side o' these mountains on Lookin'-Glass Prairie. Who might you be?"

"My name is Almond," Ed answered, thawing considerably when he learned that the man wasn't a native.

"Stranger here, ain't yuh?" the Slammer asked.

"Yes. I'm camped back up the river a ways. Cattle stampeded last night an' I'm watchin' an outfit called the Wineglass round 'em up."

"Yuh know," the Slammer said confidentially, "I suspected somethin' o' the sort when I passed yore camp back yonder. Yuh ain't aimin' tuh locate here, be yuh?"

"We are—at the Gammon ranch."

"Forgive 'em, fer they know not what they do," the Slammer implored of the surrounding atmosphere.

"What's wrong?" Ed asked crisply.

"Well, I don't believe in gossip, but I happen tuh know that any outfit that bucks up against this Wineglass crowd ain't got as much chance as a muley steer in a corral full o' bulls. I could tell yuh o' plenty o' good men they run off or broke. Had tuh leave here myself, an' even now when any o' my stuff strays this side the divide, I jest let it go. Wouldn't be worth a man's life tryin' tuh git it back."

"Yuh mean tuh say that this Wineglass outfit are thieves, as well as bullies?" Ed demanded.

"Now that's a purty broad statement fer a man tuh make, an' there may be a gentler name fer what they do, but I never heard of it," the Slammer said darkly. "Anyway, I happen tuh know that they've got known outlaws on

their crew, an' some of 'em purty high up."

"Is that so?" Ed asked with undisguised interest. "Just which ones are yuh referrin' to?"

Slammer Burns began to back and fill, to hem and haw. "Mebbe I should 'a' kep' my mouth shut," he declared. "I've had all the trouble with that outfit I want. An' I couldn't offer any legal proof that yuh could use."

"Come, man, yuh must have somethin'," Ed urged, now hot on the scent of something he might use against the people he firmly believed to be his enemies.

"No; I can't tell yuh any more," the Slammer refused. "But I'll give yuh one tip that yuh might foller up if yuh don't mind takin' a chance on gittin' a bullet through yore guts the instant yuh do it."

"I'm not afraid," Ed declared.

"Then some day yuh jest casually inquire o' the Wineglass foreman if he ever heard tell o' the Far-Away Kid," Slammer Burns whispered. "An' now I gotta be travelin'. It's a long way tuh the ranch."

CHAPTER V

A Threat of Exposure

THE Far-Away Kid was troubled. The arrival of a new nester outfit in the valley had filled him with a vague uneasiness; an uneasiness which had increased when he learned of the cattle stampede from Gale Almond. There had been something about the nester girl which had stirred him strangely. Girls of her sort were scarce in Council Valley. Had it not been for another girl—

Then he realized that he and this girl were perhaps doomed to be natural enemies. He hated the thought of it.

He wasn't in entire sympathy with the exclusive policy of the Wineglass owners, but he knew that Pat Jacobs, the manager of the property and his own immediate superior, was. If he didn't do everything he could to keep nesters out, he would lose his job. And he had worked too hard to achieve that measure of success to lose it lightly. He had worked with a purpose. There was a girl, a slim, hazel-eyed girl with long, silky brown tresses and laughter in her eyes, whose image was as clear in his mind as a fine cameo. For her sake he had given over the things which appealed to most men of his age, and in consequence his rise to a position of responsibility had been rapid. Why, then, he asked himself, should he lose it all because of a nester outfit who would lose anyway?

He could also see the justice of his employer's position. It was easy to drive Wineglass cattle away through the deep, timbered canyons into neighboring valleys and basins that were the known habitats of outlaws. It was hard enough to contend with these outsiders, but when they were abetted by accomplices within the valley it became well-nigh impossible. There seemed to be no good reason for anyone else invading the valley unless their purposes were dishonest. Certainly they couldn't hope to buck the Wineglass and prosper.

Now, even as he was conducting a swift round-up to recover the nester's cattle that had been stampeded, he realized he was doing something which Jacobs wouldn't have permitted had he been at the ranch. The Wineglass men hadn't caused the stampede, but Jacobs would have chuckled because of it. Not only would he have refused to help gather the Bar A stuff but he would have forbidden the Almonds to molest any Wineglass cattle. The Far-Away Kid knew that he was letting himself in for a calling-down at the very least.

He wondered who had actually caused the stampede and why. The fact that Ed Almond's stolen horse had been left in the Wineglass pasture indicated clearly that somebody was deliberately trying to make the Almonds think that the Wineglass was guilty.

His encounter with Ed Almond gave him something to worry about, and he didn't like the attitude of some of his own men, particularily Mick Finn.

"Ride hard, but be sure nothin' slips through," he told his crew, and he himself took the lead. He swung his line around in a quarter-circle toward the north until convinced that they were well ahead of all Bar A stock. Then the line worked rapidly back, sweeping everything ahead of it toward the south side of Looking-Glass Creek. They stopped for nothing, and an hour before sunset a herd of nearly a thousand head had been gathered halfway between the creek and the place where the Almonds had been camped.

Marve Almond had joined the round-up shortly after noon. He had accepted the Wineglass assistance quietly, and had proceeded to help make the drive. He had been in contact with Lusty Williams several times during the afternoon, and the Wineglass puncher had seemed friendly.

"I can't blame you folks fer thinkin' we caused this," Lusty said, "but we're plumb innocent. We was all in the bunkhouse last night."

"Well, somebody did it," Marve pointed out.

"Somebody who wanted tuh git us tuh shootin' holes through each other likely," Lusty said. "Mebbe it was the Gammons, or some o' their friends."

"The Gammons?"

"Yeah—the people yuh bought yore place from. They was no-good yokels, yuh know. We got the goods on two of 'em an' run the other three outa the country. They was stealin' us blind. Yuh see there's allus been a tough outfit on that ranch yo're headin' fer, an' that's what makes the Wineglass object tuh havin' anybody there," Lusty explained.

"That's news tuh me," Marve said. "Just what happened to the two Gammons yuh got the goods on?"

"We sent 'em over the road. We'd 'a' hung him if it hadn't been fer our ridin' boss here, Larry Evans. He wouldn't stand fer it, an' fer a while it looked like the only way he could stop it was tuh do some shootin' at his own crowd. But Larry's a little too slick with a gun for anybody around here tuh crowd him too much."

"I see," Marve frowned. He had an instinctive prejudice against men who were too slick with a gun.

"Say, that sister o' yores is a pip," Lusty went on. "I wish yuh'd tell her I'm sorry fer what happened yesterday."

"I'll tell her," Marve said curtly. Lusty would have continued the discussion, plainly having more than a passing interest in Gale, but Marve rode away.

When the cattle were finally gathered Ed joined his brother. Then Larry Evans rode up to where the two brothers were talking.

"I think we got everythin'," he said quietly. "It'll keep us hustlin' tuh git 'em cut out before dark, but we'll cut both ways. You can watch this side tuh see that none of yore stuff gits turned back. If any of ours git in with yores, yuh can cut 'em back tomorrow."

"All right, suits us," Marve replied.

"I don't git this," Ed said to his brother. "Why did they stampede us, an' then go tuh the bother o' gatherin' 'em up?"

"I don't know, but they seem damn certain they're not gonna let us stick here."

"I reckon Dad depended altogether too much on what that agent told him," Ed said. "But if he made a mistake, we've gotta stick to him. What kind of a country do they think it is, where one big outfit can say who shall live in the valley and who shan't?"

"I hear that this Larry Evans, the foreman, is a high-class gunman. I'd go easy about rowin' with him," Marve advised.

"I'll be careful," Ed said, "but I'm gonna have a word with him when this cuttin' is done. Hang around!"

Despite the tired horses, the cutting

was conducted with despatch. First a little bunch appeared on each side of the main herd, but very soon the central bunch dwindled till it was of equal size with the others, though the Wineglass cattle that had been cut out were making a steady stream back to the brush along the Looking-Glass. By deep dusk the middle bunch had disappeared. Two Wineglass riders were holding the Bar A stuff waiting, for Ed and Marve to take it over. The remainder of the crew was ready to go home.

Again the foreman rode up to the Almond brothers.

"Satisfied?" he asked tersely.

"For the present, yes," Ed said coldly. "We're still mindful of the threats that we won't be allowed tuh occupy our own range."

"I have nothin' to do with that," the Far-Away Kid said levelly. "The manager of the Wineglass will probably give yuh his views of that himself. My job is tuh handle our cattle—an' see that they don't get rustled."

There was a subtle inflection in the last phrase which the touchy Ed didn't fail to note.

"Yuh judge people damn quick in this country, don't yuh?" he snapped. "Before ever yuh know who we are or where we're from, yuh accuse us of bein' rustlers. Well, I've always noticed that most crooks are plumb ready to accuse other folks of crookedness."

"I'm not accusin' yuh—I'm warnin' yuh," the Far-Away Kid said coolly.

"An' I'm comin' right back at yuh," Ed Almond said. "Yuh see, I've heard of the Far-Away Kid."

Larry Evans gave a start which the Almond boys didn't fail to see. His eyes narrowed to slits, and his face became harsh. It had been a long time since he had heard that name spoken. Hearing it now, he couldn't doubt but that these men knew that he had once been known as the Far-Away Kid. Their mention of it could have been nothing else than a threat.

"I reckon we understand each other," he said curtly, and rode away.

There was a bleak feeling in the heart of the young Wineglass foreman that night which hadn't been there for a long time. For five years he had climbed a narrow and sometimes rocky path, but he had dragged along with him something that seemed bound to encompass his destruction. That something was a name which he had tried hard to discard.

It wasn't only the feeling he had of being trapped which dismayed him now, but he also felt that he had been made a fool of. He knew the hatred of the Gammons for his outfit. They had refused to sell their claim on Clevis Creek because they undoubtedly hoped to continue to harass the Wineglass. It must be, he thought, that this stampede had been deliberately plotted by the Almonds and the former allies of the Gammons with the intent of giving the Almonds an ostensible grievance against the Wineglass. He had fallen into the trap, and it was humiliating. But what made him savage was the thought that the nesters had brought a girl into the affair. Even rustlers ought to fight more fairly than that.

He thought that he could foresee the next step. Jacobs would order them to move. They would refuse to go. Cattle would disappear, and then he would be asked to stand between them and Jacobs on the penalty of being denounced as the Far-Away Kid.

At first he was tempted to throw up his job and quit the country. Then he recalled the five-year struggle he had made for the sake of a girl, and grimly made up his mind to stick to the finish. The grim set of his lips was proof that he wouldn't be beaten easily.

CHAPTER VI

Lost!

GALE ALMOND had no suspicion that any other member of her family knew anything about the Far-Away Kid. The reason for

this was simple. Ed and Marve, who felt themselves the real masters of the Bar A, had decided between themselves that it would be useless and unwise to worry the other members of the family about such matters. They professed to believe that there would be no further trouble.

For all that Gale had fallen instantly in love with the pretty little ranch lying midway between river and mountain like an emerald setting in a field of silver, she anticipated trouble. Moreover, she knew that her brothers lived in daily anticipation of it.

It was the third day after their arrival before anything was heard from the Wineglass outfit. Almond and the hired man had gone back to Sunset for the remainder of the machinery; Ed was out on the range; and Marve had gone up the creek to see about getting a larger head of water for the hay meadow. Gale and her mother were alone.

The girl saw two horsemen approaching, and for all that they were nearly a mile away she was certain that one of them was the Far-Away Kid. This she quickly verified. When they got closer she saw that the other man was older, more expensively dressed, and was riding a flashier horse. Gale contrived to be out in the yard when they stopped and so didn't give them an excuse to dismount.

The Far-Away Kid lifted his hat. "Good mornin', Miss Almond," he said. "Is yore father or brothers about the place?"

"I'm sorry, but none of them are here," she answered.

"Where are they?" the older man broke in rudely.

Gale gave the man a long, unflinching look, vibrant with dislike.

"This is Mr. Jacobs, the manager of the Wineglass," the Far-Away Kid said hastily.

"How-do," Jacobs grunted. "Where did yuh say yore men folks were?"

"I didn't say. The only one in reach is my brother, Marve. He went up the creek to get more water."

"Then he's the jasper we want to see," Jacobs declared. "Come on, Evans."

"Just a minute," the Far-Away Kid said. He had been looking at Gale most intently. When he had seen her at the ranch she had been wearing a worn riding outfit. Now she was wearing a neat-fitting little pink dress, and she looked different.

"Where did you people come from?" he asked.

Gale was quivering with inward excitement. She felt that he would remember her if she told him from the Portneuf Valley. And, somehow, she didn't want him to remember—yet.

"Why do you want to know that?" she countered.

"I don't know exactly," he said.

"Wherever it is, yuh'd better be gettin' back there," Jacobs rasped.

"Pretty high-handed, aren't you?" she retorted angrily. "Well, we own the deeds to this place. There's free range above us, and we mean to stay."

"An' just what d'yuh figure to feed yore cattle on in the winter time?" Jacobs sneered.

"On hay. We can raise it."

"Not without water yuh can't," the Wineglass manager laughed arrogantly. "An' yuh ain't got the water."

"But we have," Gale cried shrilly. "I've seen the papers. Our water right is good."

"After a certain number of second feet which must flow into the river to meet my filin's lower down on a prior claim," Jacobs laughed. "Yuh'll have some water for a while, of course. But just when yuh need it, yore ditch'll be stopped."

A dull pain numbed the girl's breast. She turned instinctively toward the Far-Away Kid. "Is—is that true?" she asked huskily.

The Far-Away Kid had come there steeled to the belief that the nesters were potential cattle rustlers, but he felt sorry for the girl. "I'm afraid it

is," he said gently. "There's water enough tuh raise hay for a few horses if put in one place. But if scattered all over, it won't go nowhere. As a matter of fact, the place hasn't put up but a few tons for years."

"Then my folks are ruined," Gale said in a thin, dry voice.

"The sooner they recognize that they can't make any headway here, the better off they'll be," Pat Jacobs said. "I'm sick and tired of havin' a rustlers' hangout right here in my own dooryard."

"Don't you dare accuse us of being rustlers," Gale cried, but Jacobs was already riding away.

Larry Evans lingered a moment, but he could think of nothing to say.

"Don't make any mistake," Gale said in a low voice. "We know who the outlaws are around here."

The foreman's face flushed. "If yo're bankin' on that fact for security, yuh never made a bigger mistake," he said curtly and rode away. Gale naturally misinterpreted what he had said as a threat. She ran into the house.

"Mother, would you mind staying here alone for a while?" she asked.

"Of course not, Gale. But where are yuh goin'?" her mother replied.

"Just for a ride," she said. "Those men claim this ranch has never put up much hay. I want to look around."

She mounted Toppy and rode up along the meadow, which was up the creek from the house. It was perhaps the first time that any of the Almonds had really investigated it closely. There had still been some snow on the ground when her father had looked at the place, and he had seen little except the natural smoothness of the meadows, and the stackyards where hay had once been stacked.

It wasn't long before Gale verified what Larry Evans had said. It might have been a fine hay ranch once, but the ditches showed that no water had passed through them for years. The stackyard fences hadn't been repaired for a long time. The long, matted grass that had grown up inside them proved that no hay had been stacked there for several seasons. She could no longer doubt that the Almond family had been swindled.

She rode out of the upper end of the ranch and headed up the main ditch at a lope, hoping to encounter Marve, but she saw nothing of him. When she reached the place where the canal left the creek she found the shovel he had taken, but he wasn't there. She wasn't easily frightened, but she was growing nervous. She forced herself to take a sane view of things.

The Far-Away Kid and his boss wouldn't have dared to harm Marve after having called at the ranch. She looked around and then realized that Marve must have left his shovel and headed across country to find Ed and tell him what he had discovered. Marve hadn't followed the canal as she had done, but the head-gate had been torn out, and the course of the creek altered so that no water could possibly be taken out. Marve must have left long before the Wineglass men had arrived.

Turning Toppy around, Gale continued on up the creek. Now that she was this far she meant to spend more time exploring the new range.

Once behind the first line of hills which shut out the valley from view, the girl became completely absorbed by the wild, rugged beauty of the country. A rougher country than any she had ever been in, it was cut and crisscrossed by deep, steep canyons, with reefs and ledges of outcropping quartz and porphyry running through them like delicate tracery in some huge, intricate pattern. Most of the surface was covered with timber or brush, and the bunch grass grew thick and high. Gale wondered that she saw no cattle.

Dropping into a deep canyon the girl suddenly noticed that the sunlight had given place to purpling shadows. It was time for her to be getting home. She followed down the canyon for half a mile and suddenly found her way

barred by a gigantic wall of porphyry. For the first time Gale felt concern. She hated to retrace her course, and realized that if she did it would be dark long before she got out of the hills and she might lose her way. Her folks would be badly worried.

She could climb out of the canyon on the side opposite the way she had entered, and if she could reach the high backbone of a ridge she believed she could follow it down to the valley, thus saving several miles. She tried it, but half an hour later again found her way barred. By now the purple shadows surrounded her even on the ridge top; the canyon bottoms were little more than black voids. Still, she refused to admit that she was lost. She knew that she would have to travel many unnecessary miles if she tried to go back, and in the darkness she might not be able to get out of some of the canyons which she had had difficulty getting into. It couldn't be many miles to the ranch if she could just keep on going east. She kept trying, but always found herself forced to go farther and farther south, and she was still apparently no nearer being out of the mountains.

It was long since dark, and the few stars that sprinkled the sky gave no light at all in the bottoms of the timbered canyons.

"Well, Toppy," the girl said at last, "there's no use to kid ourselves. We're lost. We've got a gun and a rope, so all we can do is hang up some place and wait for daylight."

She was too much of an outdoor girl to be frightened by having to sleep out, and she knew that she could find her way home in the morning. As soon as she found some dead timber to make a fire she intended to stop and spend the night. She could stake Toppy, and with a fire and her gun she felt that she had nothing to fear. Her anxiety was all because of her folks.

She had gone but a short distance after making her decision when the flicker of a campfire suddenly gleamed among the trees. She stopped, and then gave a quick jerk at the reins as Toppy opened his mouth and turned loose a ringing whinny.

"You—you silly," she cried angrily. "Don't you know that campfires don't always mean friends?"

She saw a man pass quickly between her and the fire, and then another. She felt certain that the whinny had alarmed them, and she had no wish to ride into the camp of strange men. It was too late to get out of the canyon. She could only force her pony deep into the brush along the bottom and wait. Dismounting and holding her hand over Toppy's nose to keep him from giving her away again, she listened. Presently she heard voices. Several men were coming up the creek.

"Wouldn't be no loose horse, I tell yuh," a man averred. "There's somebody hangin' round."

"Yo're just spooky, Hart," another voice called. "Who'd be up here this time o' night?"

"Heard a horse nicker, didn't yuh?" retorted the man called Hart.

"Mebbe it's the Far-Away Kid," another voice suggested.

"Naw, Mick Finn said Far-Away would be with Jacobs all afternoon."

"Shut up, will yuh?" snarled Hart. "There may be somebody listenin' tuh yore palaver right now."

"Yo're full o' spooks, Hart," sneered a sardonic voice. "A lost colt nickerin' never did scare me out of a month's growth. I say let's git tuh movin'. It's gonna be too dark tuh git much stuff anyway."

"Red's got corns on his feet an' he don't like tuh walk," another man jeered.

"I'm goin' back an' tell Slammer there ain't nothin' wrong," said the disgruntled Red.

"An' I'm gonna have a look around," declared Hart.

The word "Slammer" struck a memory cord in Gale's brain. In connection with the Far-Away Kid it could never be forgotten. The man who had an-

noyed her that memorable long ago day had been called Slammer. And these men apparently were in communication with the Far-Away Kid, for one of them had said that she might be he. The mere fact that they were in hiding here indicated what they were. In alliance with the Far-Away Kid, they were engaged in systematic rustling.

She dared not move as yet, for the man Hart was still searching for her. Several of the men had turned back, but two of them had passed so close that she couldn't see why they hadn't noticed her or her horse. However, it was pitch dark there in the brush, and she was twisting Toppy's ear with one hand so that he didn't move. Eventually she heard the last man return to the campfire.

A few minutes later she heard the men mounting their horses. They were about to make a night raid on somebody's cattle. Dared she follow them?

The outlaws put out their fire, and she heard them ride away. With fast pulsing heart she slipped the bridle reins back over Toppy's ears and toed into the stirrups. She sensed fully the danger in following the men, but it seemed the only way to find out what they were up to. For all she knew, they might be going to raid the Bar A cattle. Being unused to the range, the Almond cattle would still be in a bunch. They would be easy pickings.

She thought about waiting for the outlaws to return so that she could locate their camp in daylight, but she realized that they probably wouldn't come back to the same place. To follow them meant that she must keep close enough to hear them at all times. And if Toppy nickered again, she would be lost.

It was a twisting sort of a trail which the outlaws followed at first, and Gale was in constant danger that in making one of the loops she might get so close to them that she would be seen; but it was at least the way out of the mountains for which she had been looking. Then, finally, the trail seemed to drop into the bottom of a wider canyon which led straight out to the valley.

Gale heaved a little sigh of relief as she heard the men start into a trot farther down the canyon. Once out of the mountains, she felt that she would have a chance to escape, even if they did hear her.

But disaster was nearer than she realized. She had just passed between two huge clumps of willows, when she heard a movement behind her. Before she could turn the harsh voice of the man Hart, burst upon her ears.

"Stop an' throw 'em up, or I'll plug yuh right in the back," the man warned implacably.

Gale's heart seemed to make a tremendous spring right into her throat, but sheer instinct caused her to check Toppy and then raise her hands. Otherwise she would have died on the spot.

Hart rode alongside and removed the sixgun from her holster.

"I thought if there was anybody snoopin' around they'd be follerin' us," the man said. "Oughta teach yore horse not tuh nicker."

With an iron grip upon her bridle reins he raised his gun and fired three times as a signal to his mates. Six other men quickly returned and formed a circle around the girl.

"So there was a damned spy snoopin' around, huh?" rasped Slammer Burns. "Good work, Hart."

The outlaw leader rode close to Gale and struck a match which he shoved so close to her face that its fumes almost strangled her.

"Well, by Gawd, fellers," he marveled, "it's a gal."

CHAPTER VII

The Note in the Feed-Box

LARRY EVANS and his superior, Pat Jacobs, had been too late to catch Marve Almond at the head of the canal. Jacobs was furious.

"We've got to get that outfit out of here, Evans," he raved. "If we don't there'll be nesters on every creek, and every one of 'em stealin' our cattle."

"I don't see what we can do, Pat," Larry answered, "until they give us some excuse. They do own the land, an' they have a right tuh the range. Until they take water they shouldn't, or we ketch 'em rustlin', they're within their rights."

"Rights, hell," the manager snapped. "Yo're too easy, Evans. Yo're a good man, but yuh've got too much sentiment. Yuh made a big mistake helpin' 'em the other day."

"Well, what can we do?" Larry demanded.

"Stop this rustlin' that's been goin' on. If it hadn't been for you, we'd have made an example of them two Gammons we caught that would have kept anybody else from comin' in here. Next time things will be handled different. If yuh catch any rustler in the act, shoot to kill. If yuh capture 'em alive, use a rope."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Jacobs," Larry said quietly. "I guess yuh'll have to look for another foreman."

"What?"

"I'll do all I can to stop rustlin'—but not that way."

"Yet they tell me yo're a gunman."

"Mebbe—when I have tuh be. But I won't go out lookin' for people just tuh shoot 'em down like mad dogs."

"Can yuh stop it any other way?" Jacobs asked.

"I don't know. I do think rustlin' can be stopped. But if I was in yore place I'd try tuh buy that Gammon ranch, an' put somebody there that I'd know was honest."

"I've tried it, but the Gammons wouldn't sell to me."

"Not at the price yuh offered," Larry said. "These people claim they paid eighteen thousand. You could pay that much, give it a water right, an' it would be worth it."

"I'll pay what the bare land is worth an' no more," Jacobs said harshly. "And I expect to show that outfit that that's all they'll ever get. So I want yuh tuh comb the Lookin'-Glass country and bring the cattle there over here. Leave 'em a few days till they mix with what these nesters have and then move 'em back or some place else. In other words, keep these Bar A cattle on the move with first one bunch of ours and then another till their ribs show. In the meantime we'll see that they get no water."

"That'll be costly, Jacobs, an' if that outfit is honest, it would be givin' 'em a dirty deal," Larry argued. "Why not sell 'em a water right an' see if they wouldn't be good neighbors?"

"The Wineglass wants no neighbors," Jacobs said arrogantly. "An' now what about the rustlin'. How do yuh figure tuh stop it?"

"If I stay I'm goin' tuh watch—both the range and our own outfit."

"What do yuh mean?"

"Simply that I suspect somebody on the outfit of bein' a spy for a rustler gang."

"That sounds reasonable," Jacobs acknowledged. "But if I ever find out who that man is, God help him."

The two men parted and Larry Evans rode the range until dark. Then he turned and rode slowly toward the Gammon ranch. If these people were rustlers, it would pay to watch them. Any visitors they might have would come by night, and he intended to keep a close watch on the place until after midnight.

He left his horse well hidden some distance out, and made his way easily to the buildings. All the stables were covered with old hay and the roofs were nearly flat. Convinced that there was nobody around, he swung himself easily to a roof and flattened himself upon the musty old hay so that he wouldn't be seen. His location commanded a view of the house, which was a scant three hundred feet distant. If anybody approached the stable he would be in position to hear what was said.

For a while he saw nothing save a woman moving restlessly about the kitchen, and often coming to the door to peer out into the darkness. Then, presently, two horsemen rode in from the range. They headed for the corrals, but the woman came out and hailed them.

"Oh boys, is that you?" she called.

"Yes, Ma. What's the matter?" one of the men answered.

"Gale's gone," the woman said.

"Where's she gone?" the man asked fatuously.

"That's just it. There were two men here lookin' for yore pa or you. Gale told 'em where Marve was, an' right after that she saddled up Toppy an' rode away. She must've got lost."

"Not Gale, Mom. She'll be along. What did them fellers want?"

"They said somethin' about us not havin' no water right."

"I reckon that's the bluff they run tuh scare the last people out all right, but they'll find we're of different caliber," one of the men said.

"But what about Gale. I just know somethin's happened," Mrs. Almond protested.

"I'll go look for her, Mom," one of the men said. "Yuh better stay with Mom, Ed. She's gittin' nervous."

Larry saw one of them turn and ride back up the basin, while the other brought his horse to the stable and left it. He didn't unsaddle. Larry could see that it was Ed Almond, and he knew that there would be trouble if the man knew he was there.

Ed went straight to the house, but a few minutes later another rider appeared from the other direction. As he rode past Larry recognized Lusty Williams from his own crew. Instantly his mind became rife with suspicion.

He saw Lusty dismount and knock at the door. There was a short conversation there, and then Lusty and Ed Almond came out to where Lusty's horse stood. They talked for nearly an hour, but Larry was unable to hear what they said. Finally Lusty mounted his horse and rode away toward the Wineglass.

As a matter of fact Lusty had called to see Gale. He believed himself to be a lady's man, and the girl was desirable. He had been told that Gale wasn't at home, and hadn't been invited in. Ed had followed him out to his horse because he wanted to ask a few guarded questions about the Far-Away Kid. But if Lusty Williams had ever heard of such a person, he made no sign.

Larry was wearying of his long, cramped vigil when Marve Almond returned. He could hear little that was said, but he realized that the girl had become lost, and that her family was now genuinely alarmed. Somehow or other Larry found that he was very much concerned himself.

Ed and Marve both came out to the stable and the man on the roof could hear their words plainly.

"Sis is strange tuh the country an' she may have got lost after dark. In that case there's no use huntin' for her, because she'll just stop some place an' make a fire," Marve said.

"That's true. But on the other hand there ain't a dirty thing this Wineglass outfit wouldn't do. If she run onto them—"

"Anyway, let's ride along the foothills an' see if we can see a fire or hear her shootin'," Marve said. "It'll make Mom feel better."

The two men rode away, and Larry Evans decided that it would be a waste of time to linger on the stable roof. But he was still more puzzled because the Almonds seemed to suspect the Winegless of a willingness to resort to abduction. If they were in touch with Lusty Williams, they must have known from him that nobody at the ranch would bother a girl. But what had become of her was a question which filled the foreman with the gravest concern. It wouldn't do for him to encounter the Almond brothers in the night, but he meant to make a search for her all the same.

He waited for the Almonds to get completely out of sight and hearing before he moved, and was about to let himself down when he heard furtive footsteps. He hastily dropped into a prone position, but gazed warily around. A moment later he made out the shadowy form of a man slinking along the corral fence toward the stable.

That the fellow had been waiting for the Almonds to depart was evident. It was equally certain that he was up to mischief.

The moment the man entered the horse stable beneath Larry the latter rolled to the edge of the roof and dropped silently to the ground at one side of the stable door. It was dark inside, but Larry couid tell where the man was by sound. As he peered cautiously through the doorway he caught sight of something white which the man seemed to be trying to affix to a feed-box.

Larry hastily stepped back and drew his gun soundlessly from the holster. A minute later his prospective victim stepped out of the stable.

"Don't move!" Larry hissed as he jammed the muzzle of his gun against the fellow's ribs. The man became rigid.

"What's the idea?" Larry demanded.

The frightened man caught his breath with a gasp. "Nothin', nothin' at all," he said fervently. "I—I—got bucked off an' my horse left me. I just wanted tuh see if I couldn't borry one here."

"Oh, just a horse thief," Larry muttered.

"No; I was gonna go tuh the house an' ask fer one."

Larry reached out and removed the man's gun. "Strike a match," he ordered. When the fellow started to protest he silenced him with a vicious prod of the gun.

As the light flared up Larry stepped back so that he could view the fellow's face without being exposed himself. The man was rather small in build, with a dark, furtive-looking face. The Wineglass foreman had never seen him before.

"Now look here, Mr. Almond," the fellow pleaded, "I'm on the level about this. I just wanted tuh borry a horse. If yuh don't wanta let me have one, I kin walk home."

"Where do yuh work?" Larry asked.

The man hesitated for a moment. "At the Wineglass," he said then.

Larry smiled grimly, but he didn't volunteer the information that he was the foreman of that outfit. If the fellow wanted to think he was one of the Almond boys, let him.

"Strike another match," he commanded. When it was done, he continued: "Yuh were monkeyin' with that feed-box. Let's see what yuh were up tuh. But no funny business. I've got yuh covered, an' I won't hesitate tuh shoot."

The fellow's attitude altered abruptly. His voice had the snarling viciousness of an angry cat.

"All right, feller, have it yore own way," he shot out. "I intended for yuh tuh see that note anyway in the mornin'. But if yuh do anythin' tuh me, yuh'll never see yore sister again."

"So that's it?" Larry said. He strode across the stable floor and plucked the sheet of paper out of the crack in the feed-box where the fellow had placed it. He compelled the man to hold matches while he read it, though he kept the barrel of his gun always against the fellow's belly.

He read:

"Your sister is now a prisoner of the Far-Away Kid's gang. She won't be hurt if you use your heads and agree to work with us. To get her back this is what you must do. We want your help working Wineglass cattle out of the country. To make sure that you don't double-cross us, you've got to let us drive your herd out of the country tomorrow night. When we get them safe your sister will be returned. Try watching us and she'll never come back.

"We don't want to hurt you people, and you'll be able to get more cattle than you lose by helping us. We've got a cinch on the Wineglass. And that outfit will break you anyway if you don't go in with us.

Don't try to follow us when we take your cattle, for it'll be plumb fatal for both you and the girl."

Larry Evans crumpled the paper furiously in his hand, and it was well for the outlaw that he couldn't see the look which came into his eyes just then. But the youthful foreman relaxed quickly. This threatening note made a lot of things clear.

In the first place it was evident that the Almonds were not as yet in league with the outlaws. Probably they were innocent nesters, and the men who were trying to blame their crooked activities onto the Far-Away Kid had already contrived to poison the Almonds against him. It was this outfit, undoubtedly, that had been stealing Wineglass cattle, and it was they who had stampeded the Bar A stuff.

It wasn't so easy to decide what to do. The first consideration was to act so that no injury would befall Gale Almond. Any interference with the outlaws' plans might endanger her life. His first impulse was to interview the Almond boys as soon as possible, but he quickly realized that even a candid statement of his position might not convince them. The note itself accused him, and they knew that he worked for an outfit which was determined to ruin them.

On the other hand the Almonds had to be warned or their interference might result in disaster to them and their sister. The note would have to be left for them to read, and the man who had brought it would have to be let go.

"All right," Larry said at last. "Yuh've got us. Yuh can go. But if any harm comes to Gale, feller, I'm rememberin' yore face. The earth won't be big enough tuh hold both of us."

"She'll be all right," the outlaw affirmed, "an' yuh wont lose a thing. Yuh couldn't winter yore herd here anyway, but yuh'll git Wineglass stuff that yuh won't have tuh winter. It's a cinch. Yuh'll work with us then?"

"Naturally," Larry said. "Why should we go broke tuh save an outfit that wants tuh run us outa the country?"

"That's the spirit," the outlaw said. "My name is Lucas—Fletch Lucas. I'll be seein' yuh again."

"You bet," Larry said heartily.

Larry watched the outlaw slink away without thought of following him. Such an attempt would be a certain invitation to disaster. But he had to find out who the men were that were terrorizing the country in his name. If he only knew which of the Wineglass men was a spy for the outlaws he knew what he would do.

Presently he placed the note back in the feed-box. It would be found in the morning, and if the Almonds were wise they would make no attempt to interfere with the outlaws until their sister was safely home. He was curious as to what they could do then.

There was but one thing that he could see to do. He rode back to the ranch and, without rousing anybody, made up a bundle of food sufficient to last at least two days. This he tied on the back of his saddle. He changed to his best horse and headed into the wild country toward the head of Clevis Creek.

It was a wild and magnificent range. He knew that he might search for weeks and never find the place where the girl was kept. His one chance was to get behind the outlaws and spy upon them when they went down to drive away the Bar A cattle.

Though he watched as carefully as he could the next day, he saw nothing of the men he sought. With the coming of nightfall he mounted his horse and rode down close to the rim of the valley, directly above where he knew the Almond cattle to be. Three hundred head of stock couldn't be driven away without making some noise, and at last his vigilance was rewarded by the sound of moving cattle.

He knew then that the Almonds had swallowed their medicine, bitter

though it must be, and he honored them for it.

It was a fairly dark night, with heavy thunderheads hanging sullenly across the western horizon. There was a threat of rain which might, or might not, materialize. In the canyons it would be dark, and the rustlers would have to guide their movements by sound alone. This would be Larry's chance.

A small bunch of cattle such as the Almonds owned could be moved quite rapidly by a good-sized crew of men, and there were eight outlaws in the party. By hanging along above them, Larry was presently able to ascertain which canyon the outlaws were heading for. He knew better than to attempt to follow close enough behind the herd to be able to trail them. They were certain to leave somebody in the rear to make sure that they weren't followed. Instead of that he rode into the canyon ahead of them.

CHAPTER VIII

A Daring Decision

GALE ALMOND didn't deceive herself that her plight wasn't a serious one, but she wasn't the fainting kind, and neither was she given to hysterics. She knew that her nerves were quivering and her hands shaking, and she supposed that her face was pale; but she was grateful that the darkness prevented her fear from showing. She concentrated upon keeping her voice natural.

"I lost my way this afternoon, and I happened to see your fire," she explained to the outlaws. "I started down to ask you to show me the way home, but you'd gone, so I followed you."

"Yore horse wasn't two hundred yards from camp when it nickered, an' we didn't leave till half an hour afterward. It didn't take yuh half an hour tuh ride two hundred yards," the man Hart pointed out.

"I—I—confess that I was afraid to ride into yore camp," Gale acknowledged.

"Yo're the nester gal from the Gammon ranch, ain't yuh?" Slammer Burns inquired.

"I'm Gale Almond."

"I feel dang sorry fer you folks," Slammer said sadly. "That Wineglass outfit is turrible. But I'm powerful glad we run onto yuh. We're gonna help you people, sister."

"You can help me by showing me the trail home," Gale said.

"She's not leavin' us, Slammer," Hart said.

"Course not," Slammer agreed, "but I want the leetle gal tuh understand why we've gotta keep her with us a few days."

"That may not be safe," Gale breathed. "I doubt if even the Far-Away Kid would dare do a thing like that."

Slammer Burns laughed aloud. "Know about the Far-Away Kid, do yuh?" he asked.

"I know that he's posing as being a respectable cattle boss while all the time he is the leader of a gang of outlaws," she said.

"Meanin' us?"

"Meaning you."

"That makes it easier," Slammer chuckled. "Now what we wanta do is git yore folks tuh cooperatin' with us. The Wineglass'll break yuh; we'll make yuh. Boys, I've suddenly got a idee. I'm gonna write a note tuh this gal's folks an' have Fletch take it down there. Then we'll hustle back tuh Slide Lake an' wait till tomorrow night tuh make our drive."

Gale listened with cold horror while the outlaw leader told his men what he intended to write. She knew that it meant complete and utter ruin for her folks unless they became allies of this gang of rustlers.

While Slammer was down on his knees writing the note which Larry Evans was later to read, with two men taking turns lighting matches for him, Gale suddenly grabbed her pony with

both spurs in a desperate attempt to escape. Toppy sprang ahead, eluded Hart's clutching hand, and was almost clear of the circle when Bill Clover reached out and seized the bridle bit. The pony was thrown back on its haunches, and before it got to its feet Hart's iron fingers had seized the girl's wrists.

Gale realized that there was no chance to get away, and she composed herself as best she could to endure the ride back into the mountains. She told herself that whatever happened, she wouldn't faint.

She thought that it must be after midnight when her captors finally stopped. They had been climbing up a rough canyon where oftentimes they had to travel single file. Sometimes the horses had to leap over down logs, and at other times they rode along the bed of a tumbling, cascading little mountain creek. When they finally stopped the moonlight was spouting down in a silvery flood upon a beautiful little lake.

A long-ago landslide had shot across the narrow canyon, completely damming off the little creek and forming the little lake above. Set back from the water a little way in a cluster of pine trees was a tiny cabin. The men stopped, and Gale was invited to go in.

Somebody lighted a lantern, and the girl saw that the cabin was sparsely furnished. It had probably been built by some trapper, who had long since abandoned it.

"Make yoreself at home," Slammer Burns told her. "Soon as we git them cattle safe, we'll let yuh go. Then I reckon we'll all be right friendly."

Gale said nothing. She knew that there was no chance to escape, but she heaved a sigh of relief when she was left alone. Her first move was to barricade the door as best she could, but she wasn't molested. In the morning one of the men called to her that breakfast was ready.

Despite the desperateness of her position Gale ate a hearty breakfast. By daylight she was able to pick out the two men, Hart and Clover, who had been with Slammer Burns and the Far-Away Kid at her father's ranch on the Portneuf. She detected Hart, the quarter-breed, watching her closely, but the other two made no sign of recognition.

Until noon Gale was allowed complete freedom of movement, though she was warned not to try to go below the cabin. The horses were below, and there was no way for her to reach them or get beyond the slide without passing the cabin. If the outlaws intended to let her go the next morning, as they promised, it would do no good to hide. She guessed that there was some hidden trail out of the canyon above the lake, but even if she found it, it would only take her into the outlaw country of Hatcher's Hole. Gale climbed to the top of a rocky cliff and sat down. She could see the men near the cabin, and she saw a couple of them go out to fish. When dinner was ready she came down from her perch and joined them.

"Now yo're what I calls a sensible gal," Slammer Burns approved. "Some gals woulda been fool enough tuh make a big fuss. Have some of this trout."

Gale helped herself to the small lake trout which one of the men had cooked, but said nothing.

"Hart here claims he's dead shore he's seen yuh before some place," Slammer said. "Yuh know where?" The fellow reached out and let his grimy hand fall upon her head in a stroking motion. In sudden, irrepressible rage Gale straightened up with the hot frying-pan which she still had clutched in her right hand and slammed the fellow full in the face with its contents of fish and hot grease.

Slammer Burns went over backward with a squall of pain and anger.

Frightened and desperate, Gale dropped her plate and ran. The men were all squatted down with their plates upon their knees, and before

they could get to their feet she had gained the side of the cabin.

"Don't shoot! Grab her!" a man yelled.

Gale had but a few rods' start, but she was fleet of foot, and the outlaws in their cumbersome high-heeled boots could run no faster than she. The side of the lake, down to the lower end of the slide, was fringed with timber, which gave the girl some advantage. She reached the top of the natural dam and plunged down its short incline recklessly. Below it there was thick brush, and she was into it before her leading pursuer came in sight.

"Take the trail, git below her," shouted somebody.

"Watch the horses. Don't let her git one," yelled another.

Gale tripped and fell almost as soon as she entered the brush. On her hands and knees, she suddenly saw an opening under a huge willow clump that had been bent to the ground under the weight of last winter's snow which had drifted against the dam. Without hesitation she crawled under it and lay still.

She knew that she couldn't reach the horses and catch one before the outlaws reached them, and if she kept running through the brush she would be heard. However, if she lay still there was not one chance in a hundred that they would find her. She didn't have time to think about what good it would do her to hide; she was only relieved that she had escaped.

For the next long hour she could hear them beating the brush below her. Several times some of them passed the bush under which she lay, but they failed to see the opening into which she had crawled. Finally the search was abandoned, and the men gathered at the trail up over the dam. She could hear them distinctly.

"What the hell's the use o' botherin' about her?" a man wanted to know. "We was gonna let her go in the mornin', an' without a horse she can't find her way back in time tuh do any damage."

"Like hell we was goin' to let her go in the mornin'," Slammer Burns said hoarsely. "Once we git them nesters' cattle, I means tuh have the gal too. If I git my hands on her again I'm takin' her tuh Doc Wilson's. Doc's got an old preacher's license an' he can marry us. If takin' their cattle don't bring the nesters tuh time, that marriage will. If they make any fuss I'll git Doc tuh deny that he ever married us."

Gale listened in a chill of horror.

"Reckon yuh'll ketch her fust now, Slammer," Red Mulcahy jibed.

"She's hidin' somewhere in the brush, an' she can't git down the canyon without passin' through that gorge that the cloudburst cut out," the Slammer said. "I'm postin' a guard there. Hart's the man—she'll never git by him. An' sooner or later hunger'll make her come back tuh the cabin. When she does, I'll be there. Bill Clover an' the rest o' yuh kin go git them cattle."

"Yo're the boss, Slammer," Hart spoke up, "but yuh git into trouble ever' time yuh monkey with that gal. When she slammed yuh with that fryin'-pan it suddenly come over me where we'd seen her before."

"Yeah? Where was that?"

"At a nester's ranch on the Portneuf five years ago, the day the Far-Away Kid broke his moorin's," Hart replied.

"Well, I'm damned," Slammer Burns ejaculated. "I guess yo're right. The gal is changed, but she was only a kid then. Anyway, that makes it all the better. I'd like tuh see the Far-Away Kid's face when he finds out I've married her."

Gale would have endured any torture now rather than risk capture by the outlaws again. She had no idea how she was going to escape, for she recalled that for several hundred yards the trail ran up the center of a deep cut that wasn't more than twenty feet wide, but from which the sides of the

canyon rose precipitously. With Hart on guard there she couldn't hope to get past. But she would have starved before going to the cabin where Slammer Burns lurked like a huge, poisonous spider.

For a number of hours after the men had left Gale lay within her hiding place. Then, finally she backed out and cautiously made her way down the canyon to the head of the cut. Peering warily from the brush, she saw Hart at the lower end. The man was stretched out with his back against the solid rock, but she knew that he was alert. There was no chance to get past him unnoticed.

The sun had sunk out of sight behind the minarets which frowned down upon the lake when the girl heard the crunch of footsteps from above. She hugged the ground behind the fallen tree which sheltered her, and soon she saw Slammer Burns reach the head of the cut. He called out to Hart and the other man came up to join him. Burns had brought Hart's supper. The men met at the creek just where it entered the deep part of the cut, and were temporarily out of the girl's range of vision.

Gale knew that the cabin was unoccupied, and she knew that her Toppy pony had been taken up above the cabin with the other horses. She could catch Toppy anywhere, and she was positive that there must be a trail out above. No matter where it might lead, it couldn't be worse than being trapped where she was. Slipping away from her hiding place, she hurried rapidly back to the cabin.

She was breathless when she arrived. She was also hungry, but not enough so to compel her to eat anything that Slammer Burns might have cooked. Nevertheless, she found a box of matches, a loaf of bread, some raw potatoes and a piece of raw bacon, all of which she rolled into an empty flour sack.

The three horses were just above the cabin. She caught Toppy and saddled him hurriedly. At any moment she might expect Slammer to return. She hesitated a moment while she considered taking the outlaws' mounts with her, but decided that it would hamper her movements too much.

It was now almost dusk, and the task of finding a trail up the steep bare slopes above the lake seemed an impossible one. The timber grew only a short distance above the lake rim, and beyond that was solid rock from which the soil had long since eroded. But it was still light enough for Gale's keen eyes to see where a dim trail left the upper end of the lake. She dismounted and, leading her pony, managed to follow the trail to where it struck the end of a sort of shelf or ledge which angled upward.

She dared not venture upon that until it was thoroughly dark for fear that she would be seen by Slammer Burns, and when it became dark she realized that a single misstep might plunge her and Toppy into eternity. But since anything was better than the menace which lurked in the canyon below she finally essayed the attempt. Up and up she led Toppy, along a trail that was at no place wide enough for a horse to turn around. Below her were sheer cliffs and enormous talus slides which meant death if one happened to slip.

Then, almost before she knew it, she had dropped into a narrow crevice which led directly upward to a gap between two minarets. It was steep, but not impassable. She was soon at the top of the rim overlooking the lake, and on the other side was a trail leading down a canyon into Hatcher's Hole. In spite of possible danger ahead she mounted her pony and rode down the canyon until it entered another and larger one in which there was a creek.

Here Gale stopped and built a fire. She roasted her potatoes, broiled her bacon on a stick, and after she had satisfied her hunger, rolled up in her saddle blanket to wait for morning.

The girl was awakened by the bawl-

ing of cattle and the yells of men. She sat up suddenly and opened astonished eyes. She had been sleeping so soundly that even the rising of the sun hadn't awakened her. Now she saw a herd of cattle pouring into the canyon less than a quarter of a mile below, and it needed but a second glance for her to know that it was the Bar A herd which the rustlers were driving off.

Springing to her feet, Gale hastened to where she had staked Toppy and led the pony out of sight in the brush. She carried her saddle to the horse and threw it on. Then she waited breathlessly for the cattle to pass out of sight down the canyon. There were four men with them. She recognized them all. Five men had left Slide Lake. She wondered what had become of the fifth man; then concluded that he must have returned to the cabin at the lake to report to Slammer Burns.

She knew that the cattle must have been driven over some trail close to Slide Lake, and she had only to backtrack the herd in order to find her way home. Once she got back to the top she knew that she would be able to find her way out in the daytime. But no sooner had she thought about that than it occurred to her that the only chance her people would have to recover the stock was for her to follow the herd. If she could find out where it was being taken and then find her way home, there would be a chance not only to get back the cattle but to round up the rustlers.

She turned her back on the home trail and followed the outlaws.

CHAPTER IX

A Shock for Larry

FOR several miles Larry Evans had kept ahead of the stolen cattle herd. Then he rode into a side cove and held his horse's nostrils while the herd went by. He counted four men in all, and he was sorely tempted to stop the theft then and there. Even one man raining bullets upon them would likely make them abandon the herd. But if he did that, he knew it would endanger the girl whom he believed the outlaws had in their power.

He let them pass by, though he continued to wait. He could overhaul them again if need be, and he still believed that they would have left somebody behind to make sure that they hadn't been followed by the Almonds. Within twenty minutes his guess was proved correct. A single rider came by riding at a fast trot.

When the man was no more than twenty feet away Larry rode out in front of him. The fellow brought his horse to an abrupt stop, and his hand streaked to his gun.

"Drop it," Larry said curtly. "Yo're covered. Make a false move an' I'll be obliged tuh let yuh have it—right in the guts."

Slowly the man's hand came back to rest upon the saddle horn. "H-how in the hell did yuh git between me an' the others?" he blurted.

"So it's you, is it?" Larry grinned, as he now recognized the same man who had left the note.

"Look here, Almond, I warned yuh that if yuh tried anythin', yore sister would suffer," the fellow threatened weakly.

"Mebbe. But if yuh don't tell me where she is, you'll suffer a lot worse," Larry said.

"What do yuh mean?" Fletch Lucas faltered.

"Just this, hombre. Yuh made a powerful big mistake last night when yuh thought my name was Almond. An' yore gang made a worse one when they took liberties with my name."

"Who—who are you?"

"I'm the Far-Away Kid."

"M-my Gawd!" the outlaw mumbled.

"Maybe I should have made yuh tell where the girl was last night," Larry said, "but I was afraid somethin' might happen tuh her if yuh didn't show up. I'm not afraid of that now, but somethin' will sure happen tuh you if yuh don't tell me where she is."

"Wha-what would yuh do?" the outlaw asked fearfully.

"My boss is determined tuh hang every rustler he can catch red-handed. I saved two of the Gammons from stretchin' hemp, but I can turn you over to the Wineglass crew with a good grace."

"Yuh wouldn't dare. They'd find out who yuh are."

"Let 'em. They're bound to know that anyway in a few days. If it comes to that, I can attend tuh the hangin' myself. Yud'd better tell me where the Almond girl is."

Fletch Lucas lacked the courage to withstand a man like Larry Evans. He was a valuable man for the outlaws to have because of his sneaking qualities, but he had never been renowned for bravery.

"If I tell yuh will yuh let me go?" he whimpered.

Larry considered the matter for a moment. "If yuh talk plenty an' tell me all I want to know I will—as soon as the girl is released," he promised.

"Well, she's at the old cabin above the narrows in Slide Canyon. Slammer Burns and Walt Hart are guardin' her while the rest of us haze the cattle off."

"Slammer Burns and Walt Hart!" Larry exclaimed. "So, that's what's back of it? I might have guessed it long ago."

"The Slammer has got it in for yuh because yuh robbed him years ago," Lucas said.

"Yes, I know. I've got a crow tuh pick with Slammer, too," Larry said grimly. "Well, come along, Lucas. I'll have tuh take yuh with me for a ways."

Larry removed the man's sixgun and made him ride alongside as they cut across the mountains toward Slide Canyon. He knew that he would have to tie the man up, but he wasn't heartless enough to leave the fellow where he might die from starvation or exposure in case something happened to Larry himself so that he couldn't come back.

But once they were in Slide Canyon he compelled the man to dismount and he made him fast to a small tree with Fletch's lasso rope. Sooner or later somebody was bound to come along, if Larry didn't return.

The Wineglass foreman knew that the narrows might be guarded, and if so, getting past them presented a real problem, for the canyon walls were almost perpendicular. He dismounted some distance below and advanced silently toward the deep cut through which the creek thundered in a welter of foam.

Step by step he made his way forward until there remained but a six-foot shelf between the madly plunging creek and the side of the cliff. That shelf was a hundred feet long. Hugging the cliff as tightly as he could, Larry inched his way along until not more than a rod remained to be traversed. Then the light from a cigarette flickered for an instant in the darkness.

Larry paused. A moment later he realized that the smoker's back was to him. Had not the man waved his hand for some reason, he wouldn't have seen the light. A moment later he was able to make out the dim outlines of the man's shape. The fellow was watching to see that nobody came down the creek. Only because of that had Larry been able to approach so closely, unseen.

Silently the foreman drew his gun. "Hands up, stranger—and don't turn around!" he shot out suddenly. Without hesitating he strode forward boldly, though he saw the figure give a start and then grow rigid.

As he drew closer Larry saw that the man was seated upon a boulder. Larry got the fellow's sixgun and tossed it into the cascading stream. A bitter oath escaped the despoiled man's lips. Larry laughed.

"Still the same old tight-wad, ain't yuh, Hart? Gittin' shot wouldn't hurt yuh half as much as the price of the gun."

"The Far-Away Kid!" the seated outlaw exclaimed.

"None other. Where's the Slammer?"

"He ain't around here."

"No? I happen tuh know he is. Fletch Lucas told me all about yore schemes," Larry stated. "It won't do any good to hold out on me, Hart. I know you an' Slammer are holdin' the Almond girl up here in this cabin."

"All right, if yuh know so much, I've got no more tuh say," Hart shrugged. "Slammer has got her up there in that cabin. Yuh know, he's been wantin' tuh git that gal ever since that time that you busted his jaw about her five years ago."

"What's that?" Larry hissed. "What did yuh say?" The muzzle of his gun jabbed Hart's spine so hard that the man cried out with pain.

"Hell, don't yuh know who she is?" the man blurted. "That's the doll we had dinner with that day after we robbed the Springdell bank."

Had Walt Hart been looking he might have made a successful bid for freedom. For the moment Larry Evans seemed paralyzed. Gale Almond was the same girl he had cherished in his heart since that long-ago day when he had ridden with the Slammer's hard-bitten crew of outlaws! Many times he had reviled himself for having failed to find out her name. But why hadn't he recognized her before? That was what he couldn't understand. From her first appearance in the country, that morning when she had accused him of stampeding her father's cattle, she had moved him powerfully; yet he hadn't understood. But her image as she had appeared that day back on the Portneuf had been so fixed in his mind that he had been unable to comprehend that she might have changed.

Out of the maze of wild, chaotic thoughts which chugged through his brain came one which made him see red. Gale was up there in that cabin at the mercy of the brutal Slammer! He must get up there at once.

Holstering his gun, he seized Hart's arms and forced the quarter-breed down on his stomach. In short order he tied the man's hands behind him with a saddle string he had brought along for that purpose. He ripped off Hart's belt and, wrapping it tightly around the fellow's ankles a couple of times, buckled it tight. Then he forced the fellow's neckerchief tightly into his mouth as a gag, and tied it firmly.

"That'll hold yuh for a while, I reckon," he remarked grimly. "Don't thrash around too much. Yuh might roll off into the creek an' drown."

An incoherent gurgle was the only answer.

His heart pounding inside his breast like a trip-hammer, Larry scrambled on up the rough trail toward the old cabin. A cold, stark fear that he might already be too late assaulted his brain like an actual blow.

But other things were now made clear to him—some of them too painfully clear. Now he knew how it was that the Almonds knew he was the Far-Away Kid. What he couldn't understand was why they hadn't denounced him long before.

Anyway, it meant the end of his dream. For five years he had worked hard to establish himself so that he might go back to the Portneuf one day and find this girl. Now she knew him as an outlaw, and she undoubtedly believed that he was responsible for the troubles which had overtaken her family.

But regardless of what she might think, he had to deliver her safely back to her home. He would have done the same had she been the stranger he had thought her to be, but it was doubly urgent now.

The old, dilapidated cabin loomed suddenly before him, a mere vague gray shape almost overgrown with bushes. He paused a moment. Everything was still, and the cabin was dark. His heart stood still with cold terror

as he thought of what he might find inside. Then he steeled himself and, gun in hand, advanced slowly toward the cabin door.

He couldn't know that Slammer Burns was lurking in those bushes beside the house, hoping that hunger would force Gale Almond there in search of food. It had been nearly dark when the Slammer returned from the narrows and he hadn't missed the girl's pony. Consequently he believed the girl still to be hiding in the canyon.

When Slammer first sighted the Far-Away Kid he believed it to be Gale, and a coarse grin twisted his brutal features. His face hardened when he saw that it was a man. Larry Evans was within ten feet of the door when a stray beam of moonlight fell full upon his features. The Slammer almost betrayed himself by a startled snort. Then his evil features became positively malignant. The man he had hated for so long was deliberately walking into his trap.

Just outside the open cabin door Larry paused and listened. He could hear no sound, but it didn't necessarily mean that the cabin was vacant. Anyway, he couldn't leave without making a thorough investigation. Gingerly he stepped inside. Still no sound.

"Gale!" he called softly.

Then suddenly he felt a terrific impact upon the back of his head. He swayed a moment, trying vainly to cry out. Then everything went black and he fell headlong upon the dirt floor of the cabin.

CHAPTER X

"The Far-Away Kid's Gone"

WHEN Larry Evans recovered consciousness the sun was streaming through the cracks on the east side of the cabin. He was lying upon a pallet of ill-smelling horse blankets, and he was unable to move either hand or foot. His head ached horribly, and it was a few minutes before he realized where he was or what had happened. He was so cold that he guessed the sun had just come up.

"Gittin' yore eyes open, are yuh, Kid?" a coarse voice asked. "How'd yuh like it?"

Larry rolled his head enough to allow his eyes to rest upon Slammer Burns. There was a grin upon the huge outlaw's face, but his little eyes betrayed primitive hate.

"Where's Gale Almond, Slammer?" Larry asked.

"Wouldn't yuh like tuh know?" the outlaw chuckled. "You had yore turn that day at the nester's ranch. Mine's gonna last a lot longer than yores did."

"Where is she?" Larry repeated. "She got away from yuh, didn't she? She'd have been here if she hadn't."

"Like hell she did," the man cursed.

"Hey, Slammer, come out here," somebody called excitedly. Larry recognized Walt Hart's voice.

Slammer scowled angrily and withdrew. Larry could tell from the tones that Hart had brought news which didn't set well with the Slammer, but he couldn't understand the words, though the Slammer's voice betrayed angry surprise.

"Take a look around," Larry finally heard the Slammer say as the man reappeared in the doorway.

"Bad news?" Larry queried sardonically.

"Yo're allus bad news," the other grunted. "But I expect tuh git some good news outa yuh before I'm through with yuh."

"Really?"

"I shore do. Now listen, you Far-Away Kid: Yuh done me dirt once, pulled the dirtiest trick one man could do tuh another—double-crossed yore pals. That night after yuh stayed behind tuh make love tuh that Almond gal, yuh sneaked into our camp an' stole the twelve thousand dollars we got from that Springdell bank job. I swore then that I'd git yuh fer it, an' I reckon the time has come."

"It looks like yuh'd got yore chance," Larry agreed.

For a minute the big outlaw glared down at his helpless prisoner while hatred and avarice struggled for mastery in his mind. The latter won.

"Far-Away, I'm givin' you just one chance tuh save yore bacon," he said at last.

"Yes?"

"Yuh got away with that twelve thousand dollars. They tell me that yuh come here right after that an' that yuh ain't dissipated none. Yuh must still have that money. Give it back to me an' I'll let yuh go free."

"Suppose I can't give it back?"

"Then, by Gawd, yuh'll swing," the big outlaw gritted. "Listen, you fool. That gal rode right smack into our hands. That give us a chance tuh git away with her folks' cattle. We left a note in their stable tellin' 'em that you was back of it, an' we know one of 'em found it. They're layin' off 'count of the gal. But when she don't come back, they'll take that note tuh Pat Jacobs. All we gotta do is leave yuh where brother Jacobs'll find yuh. Yuh know what he'll do!"

Larry knew, indeed. Jacobs had always wanted to hang rustlers, and he wouldn't pass up the chance to hang the leader. The manager would believe now that Larry had saved the Gammons from the gallows because they were his friends.

"What do yuh intend tuh do about Gale?" he forced himself to ask.

"I'll take care of her all right," Slammer guffawed.

"If yuh do anythin' tuh her, yuh'll never be able tuh operate here again. Jacobs will know that the Almonds aren't rustlers, and yuh can't ever hope tuh use the Gammon place again," Larry argued.

"Never mind that. There's plenty of other countries tuh work in. If I git them Bar A cattle an' the gal, I'll be satisfied. But if yuh wanta save yore bacon, kick in with that twelve thousand."

"Yo're a fool, Slammer," the Far-Away Kid argued. "If yuh let the girl go home an' me go back to the Wineglass as foreman, the Almonds would have tuh help us, an' we could get away with a lot more than that twelve thousand."

"Think I'd trust yuh again?" the Slammer sneered. "Not so's yuh'd notice it. Nor them Almonds either. I know what I want."

Larry said nothing more. There was no use trying to fool Slammer Burns that way. The outlaw leader knew as well as Larry did that the foreman wouldn't turn crooked. Yet to save Gale Almond, Larry was prepared for any sacrifice. He wondered vaguely where she was.

"What about it?" Slammer demanded harshly. "Are yuh gonna kick in?"

"I am not," Larry said tersely.

The big outlaw strode forward and kicked the helpless puncher in the ribs. Larry cringed inwardly from the pain, but he held his features rigid save for a contemptuous smile.

"By rights I should string yuh up myself, yuh double-crosser," the outlaw leader raved. "But it'll be more fun tuh know that yo're gittin' it from yore friends—an' yuh won't be able to prove yore innocence."

Presently Walt Hart reappeared, and the men talked outside in low tones. Whatever the news Hart brought, it was displeasing to Slammer Burns. Somehow Larry guessed that it had to do with Gale Almond, and his heart grew lighter, even though he could see no possible hope for himself.

Soon the men came in and Larry was jerked onto his feet. They released his legs but kept his hands tightly bound. Three saddled horses stood in front of the cabin, his own among them. He was compelled to mount, and his feet were tied together by a rope under the horse's belly. His hands were then tied to the saddle horn, and a gag was thrust into his mouth.

"You know what tuh do," Slammer

addressed his lieutenant. "Waste no time." The outlaw leader mounted his own horse and started to ride away up the canyon. Fifty feet distant he paused and called back to Larry: "Sorry I can't stay with yuh, Far-Away, but I've got a date with the Almond gal. So long, an' may yore neck stretch a foot."

At the moment Larry hated to see Slammer Burns riding away unscathed worse than he dreaded his own impending fate. He knew that he could expect no mercy from Walt Hart. In his silent way the quarter-breed was as cruel and deadly as Burns himself.

"All right, Far-Away, it's the back trail for you," Hart said, as he slid into his own saddle, and started down the creek, leading Larry's horse.

Larry knew that he was slated to be turned over to Pat Jacobs as a rustler, but he couldn't guess how it was to be accomplished. They had gone but a short distance, however, before they heard somebody give a feeble yell. A look of fear came over Hart's face as he spurred his mount into the nearest thicket and dragged Larry's horse after him. The fellow looked to see that the puncher's gag was in place; then he dismounted and went forward on foot to investigate.

Larry knew that the breed wouldn't be gone long, and he tried desperately to undo the hackamore on his horse's head with his teeth. A Mazeppa ride was preferable to being a prisoner. But his efforts were in vain. Before he had made any real headway Hart had returned, with Fletch Lucas in tow. The outlaw who had spent the night trussed to a tree was a deplorable-looking sight, and he balefully glared his hatred of the man who had tied him up.

"Gittin' some o' yore own medicine now, ain't yuh?" Lucas jibed bitterly. "I hope yuh choke on that gag."

Being unable to answer, Larry gazed indifferently toward the tree tops.

Something else was in the wind now, however. Larry quickly found that he was to be turned over to Lucas and that Hart was in a hurry to go elsewhere. Had he known that Walt Hart wanted to get where he could intercept Gale in case she back-tracked the stolen cattle, he would have been less pleased. Now he felt that there might be a chance to overpower the slinking Lucas.

Before Hart departed, however, Larry was taken to a secluded nook at the foot of a forty-foot-high cliff, screened by a thicket of young aspen trees. It was a spot where no one was ever likely to come, and yet Larry noticed at once that the grass had been trampled down as though it had been much frequented. It was, he knew instantly, a hidden rendezvous for members of the outlaw gang.

Larry was untied and jerked to the ground, but he was promptly lashed to the bole of a small tree in a sitting position, and then his feet were anchored to another one. Nobody but a Houdini could have extricated himself from such a position.

"Yuh've made one blunder, Lucas," Hart warned his fellow outlaw. "Make another one an' I'll slit yore gullet after Slammer gits through with yuh."

"Think I'd let this cuss git loose after what he done tuh me?" Lucas complained aggrievedly.

"Well, yuh'd better not," Hart said darkly. "Don't let him work on yore sympathies. Keep that gag in his face an' don't let him work nothin' loose."

The quarter-breed rode away, and Fletch Lucas, cowardly little rat that he was, proceeded to vent his spleen upon the helpless puncher in cruel and disgusting ways. Larry endured in silence, but he vowed vengeance in case he ever did escape.

The hours dragged by endlessly, but dusk came at last and with it a temporary surcease from Fletch Lucas' torment. The little outlaw mounted his horse and rode away, though assuring the bound man that he would never be out of earshot.

Larry threw himself violently against

his bonds, twisting this way and that until the skin was rubbed from wrists and ankles; but his efforts were unavailing. The foul gag in his mouth had become sheer torture.

An hour later Fletch Lucas returned Dark as it was Larry could see the satisfied smirk upon the fellow's face.

"It won't be long now, me hearty," the outlaw taunted. "They'll be stretchin' yore neck at dawn, an' glad to do it."

Fletch Lucas had had a hard night, and despite his desire to gloat over his prisoner he gave way to the demands of nature and, wrapping himself in a blanket, seated himself with his back against a rock. In a short time he was snoring lustily.

Larry had been chewing constantly upon the gag, and at last he had worn the rag through so that he could spit it out and breathe freely once more. But getting out of his bonds was an entirely different matter. Before he could do anything else he had to free his hands. They were tied in front of him, and the rope around his body also passed around his elbows. Now he reversed his efforts to pull his arms upward, and wriggled down as far as possible. At last he was able to get his hands up to his teeth.

At times he felt as though the overstrained muscles in his jaws and neck would break, but doggedly he kept on, and at last got one leather string through the knot. Twenty minutes later his wrists were no longer tied together, and it was comparatively easy to work his arms free of the ropes around his body and the tree. He was drenched with sweat from his efforts, but Fletch Lucas slept on.

Liberating his arms provided more slack around his body. Larry took advantage of it to wriggle farther downward. Now he found that the very fact that his feet were tied to another tree was a help. As he got slack he would wrap his toes over that rope and pull. It was a long time before he could squeeze his broad shoulders through the last coil, but at last it was accomplished, and he was free except for the rope that bound his feet. With all the slack he wished and his hands free, it was an easy matter to attend to that.

He stood up at last, a sore and bruised man, but with the blood tingling through his veins confidently. Fletch Lucas gave a loud grunt, and moved in his sleep. Larry poised for a swift attack, but the fellow rolled over on his side and was soon snoring again.

The puncher stepped over and stealthily withdrew the sixgun from the tired outlaw's holster. After that Fletch Lucas was no more dangerous than a plucked fowl.

For a moment Larry deliberated whether to make Lucas again a prisoner. But before he could make up his mind he heard voices approaching from the creek. He leaped back into the shadows of the cliff, and a second later Lucas awoke with a snort and a sputter.

An instant later he emitted a wild screech as he discovered the absence of his prisoner.

"What the hell?" bellowed a voice which sounded familiar to Larry.

"He's gone," Lucas wailed. "The Far-Away Kid's gone."

Larry could see the vague outlines of two horsemen thrusting their way through the thicket, but he decided that it was no place for him at the present moment. He slipped around the face of the cliff and disappeared in the welcoming brush.

CHAPTER XI

A Night of Suspense

THE Bar A cattle were being driven down into a wild jumble of rocky ridges and crooked, timbered canyons—outposts of that outlaw haven known as Hatcher's Hole.

As Gale followed cautiously behind, she saw that they were being taken so skilfully from gorge to gorge that it would be impossible ever to trail them.

She knew instinctively that if she let them out of her sight the Almonds would never see them again. All the hopes of her family reposed in that little bunch of cattle. Her parents depended upon them for security in their old age; her brothers for their start in life. Gale didn't think of herself, but of what it meant for the others. She knew they would be frightfully worried over her absence, but that would be forgotten when she returned with the cattle.

She had plenty to worry about. As soon as Slammer Burns knew she had gotten away on Toppy he would be after her. She didn't believe, however, that he would think about her coming this way. He was more likely to take the other direction, hoping to overtake or intercept her before she could reach home.

The mere thought of the ill-mannered outlaw gave her a nauseating chill. Then her mind seethed with indignation as she thought about the Far-Away Kid, who, she had every reason to suppose, had planned the theft of the cattle. Angry as she was, she didn't believe that he had had anything to do with her being detained at the cabin. In fact there lurked a delusion in the back of her mind that if she did fall into the outlaws' clutches again that the Far-Away Kid would see to it that she was returned to her home.

She followed the cattle till noon; then almost blundered squarely into the camp of the outlaws. Just in time she whirled Toppy back over a ridge as she saw a thin spiral of smoke rising from a clump of aspens just below.

She had caught sight of a narrow little valley carpeted with luxuriant grass. The hard-driven cattle were feeding upon this grass as if they were staked. The outlaws' horses grazed near the spring which the girl had glimpsed.

For an instant Gale had ceased to breathe. Then, sheltered behind the ridge, she paused to take stock.

The outlaws would believe themselves safe from pursuit, and the tired cattle would surely remain in the little valley until they were thoroughly rested after the long, hard drive. They had been driven down over a talus slide which they certainly wouldn't try to climb back over. Gale guessed that the outlaws would eat their lunch, and then perhaps go on to some of their hide-outs.

The girl was saddle-weary and hungry. It seemed time to turn back. Even now she knew that she could no more than reach the summit before dark, and if she tried to go farther she would again get lost. It would be noon the next day before she could hope to get home.

A vagrant breeze whipped across the ridge, carrying the tantalizing odor of bacon and coffee, bringing forcefully home to Gale how very hungry she was going to be before she got home. The men had been up all night. Would they not go to sleep after they had eaten? If they did, there might be a chance to slip into their camp and obtain food. The tang of the food still lingered in the girl's nostrils. She decided to wait an hour or so anyway. They would surely go to sleep or else move elsewhere, and they might leave some food.

Staking Toppy where the little horse could graze, she again made her way to the top of the ridge. Keeping to the cover of the copse of trees, she made her way down to where she could see the outlaws' fire. Already they were eating. She settled herself behind a sarvis bush to wait as patiently as she could. She wished that she might hear what the men were saying, but dared not get closer.

She quickly ascertained, however, that the men were expecting someone to overtake them, and they seemed somewhat concerned about the matter. It dawned on her then that they were expecting Slammer Burns and the other man to arrive with her as their prisoner. She was almost afraid to

move in any direction for fear of again encountering the man she hated.

To her relief the men presently stretched out on the warm grass and their attitudes quickly convinced her that they were sound asleep. Cautiously as a cat stalking a mouse, the girl crept forward toward the pile of dunnage the outlaws had dumped upon the ground.

They hadn't washed their tin dishes, and there were several generous strips of bacon and a big hunk of frying-pan bread on a tin plate. Gale broke open the bread and inserted the bacon between the pieces. It made an enormous sandwich. She was about to retire when her eyes fell upon the coffee-pot. Temptation was too great. She found a clean tin cup and emptied the remainder of the contents of the coffee-pot into it. As she replaced the coffee-pot on the ground the bail fell with a tinny sound, and a red-headed outlaw turned over and sat up.

"Oh!" The scream escaped Gale's lips involuntarily, and she turned to flee.

"Stop!" Red Mulcahy yelled, and instantly the other outlaws were awake.

Gale ran blindly back up the hill, but she still held her cup of coffee in one hand, and the sandwich in the other. She had gone but a few rods, however, before she realized that Red Mulcahy was rapidly overtaking her. It was useless to run. She whipped about and faced the outlaws defiantly.

"If yuh was hungry, why didn't yuh wake us up an' tell us so?" Red asked quietly.

"Where's Slammer?" one of the other men asked suspiciously.

"How should I know?" Gale answered. "I got my pony and followed the cattle. I haven't seen him, and I hope I never do."

"So do I," Red said quickly. "We allus git in a jam every time Slammer takes it into his head tuh monkey with some woman."

"Then why don't you let me go?" Gale retorted.

"Damned if it ain't a good idee," Red acquiesced.

"Slammer would raise hell," another man warned.

"Look here," Red argued. "If we keep this gal, we'll have tuh leave the country. But if she gits back home an' we keep these cows, her folks'll have tuh help us make a real grab off the Wineglass. Why should we lose a lot o' kale just tuh satisfy Slammer Burns?"

Gale listened with amazement. She saw that one of the outlaws favored Red's argument; the other two were loyal to Burns.

Since the argument was growing heated she calmly seated herself and began to consume the lunch she had purloined. Once Red gave over long enough to offer to cook something more for her.

"Don't trouble yourself," she refused. "I feel better now."

"Yo're crazy, Red," spoke up a squat outlaw named Clover, whom Gale remembered as one of the party she had been forced to cook for that long-ago afternoon, and who was now violently opposing Red's suggestions. "If we let this gal go back, she'll have the Wineglass outfit an' her own folks on our tail, an' we'll be lucky tuh git away with our hides. If we keep her, the Far-Away Kid'll take the rap an' we'll be in the clear."

"Keep her, I say," another bearded ruffian growled.

"Well, I reckon we'll have to," Red surrendered, and the girl's hopes sank. But she was puzzled by their mention of the Far-Away Kid.

"Why should the Far-Away Kid take the rap for the rest of you?" she asked suddenly.

"Because, lady, he's got it comin' to him," Clover grinned evilly. "Five years ago that dirty crook stole twelve thousand dollars from Slammer, an' me an' Walt Hart. Now we're payin' him back by lettin' his own outfit hang him fer bein' the head of our gang."

"I—I don't understand," the girl gasped.

"Don't yuh? Well, after yuh rode right up on us that night, the Slammer sent a man down tuh leave a note with yore folks tellin' 'em what they'd have tuh do tuh git yuh back, an' he wrote the Far-Away Kid's name on it. When yuh don't show up, yore folks'll take that note tuh Pat Jacobs. He'll know then that the Far-Away Kid's been the spy fer the rustlers right along, or he'll think he knows it. Curtains fer the Far-Away Kid," the man ended with a gloating grin.

"Then—then the Far-Away Kid hasn't been an outlaw here?" Gale faltered.

"That crazy fool has been so honest since he grabbed that twelve thou' that he leans over backward."

A pain like a knife-thrust went through the girl's heart. No matter what the Far-Away Kid might have done some time ago, she had wronged him by thinking that he was an outlaw now. And he would be murdered because she had foolishly allowed herself to be captured, and her folks would be the indirect means of his execution.

Somehow or other she must contrive to escape and get back to Clevis Creek before it was too late.

Red Mulcahy had given up the effort to have her liberated, and Clover and his ally were taking no chances on her escape. Once Red asked her where her horse was, and when she told him the red head slouched away over the ridge. He came back carrying her saddle, and stated briefly that he had turned the pony loose to join the others.

Forgotten now was the necessity to watch the cattle.

Gale lived in an agony of apprehension lest Slammer Burns return before she could get away. The men had made it plain to her what her fate was to be in the hands of the brutal outlaw. Blood-chilling though it was, her present anxiety was all for the Far-Away Kid.

The afternoon wore away at last. The men had cooked supper, and Gale again forced herself to eat a little. She could tell that Clover and the outlaw called Bisbee were worried about her disposal for the night. They dared not leave her alone, and there was no cabin to put her in.

"Aw quit chirpin'," Red Mulcahy said contemptuously. "She's got more sense than tuh try tuh git away in the dark on foot. Give her a little liberty."

"No, sir," Clover refused flatly. "She can have some blankets an' sleep there in them trees, but we stand guard. Red, you an' Bisbee can set up the first part o' the night; me an' Whitey Furniss'll stand the last half."

This arrangement would frustrate any plan Red might have to let the girl go. Gale's last, lingering hope died. At that Red had given her no reason to suppose that he might be willing to antagonize his fellows.

The red-headed outlaw spread some blankets for her at the edge of the trees about fifty feet from the fire. Gale came over and watched him. If he meant to do anything, he would tell her now.

"The moon goes down about three o'clock in the mornin'," the fellow whispered to her out of one corner of his mouth. He said something entirely different in his usual tone, then whispered again: "Yore pony'll be tied where yuh left him. I'll take him back there after I go off guard duty. When Whitey yells out that he sees somethin' after our horses, git up an' run. But don't do nothin' until then."

"I will," Gale whispered back, her heart suddenly lighter. They went on talking.

"Git what sleep yuh can, because yuh'll be woke up at midnight," were Red's last whispered words.

Gale lay down fully dressed and tried to sleep, but the excitement in her brain kept her restless. Finally, however, she did drop off into a fitful slumber from which she was awakened by hearing Red's slurring tones.

"There she is, Clover," the man was

saying. "Yuh've caused me tuh lose half a night's sleep I'd just as well have had. If she gits away now, it's not my fault."

"She'll not git away," Clover said grimly.

There was no more sleep for Gale that night. She lay there watching the slow descent of a gorgeous moon which seemed strangely reluctant to leave the sky.

It seemed that the night would never pass, but all things have to end, and finally the moon rolled out of sight behind a distant mountain. It had been steadily growing darker, and now blackness settled over the little mountain valley like a blanket.

Bill Clover stirred uneasily. Gale saw him bring an armful of dry wood and fling it upon the fire. Instantly the flames leaped up, and the radius of light fell full upon the girl's blankets. Purposely the girl raised one white arm as though to fend off the light, so that Clover could see that she was still there. She heard the man give a satisfied grunt, and he hunkered down beside the fire.

Whitey Furniss, the other man on guard, prowled restlessly. Slowly the fire died down, and the circle of firelight receded inch by inch toward its center. At last the girl's blankets again were in darkness save for the fitful fingers of light which played over them as some dry stick flared up momentarily.

Would Whitey never yell? Had Red Mulcahy only been tormenting her by promising that she would have her chance? In an hour more dawn would be breaking, and her last chance would be gone. Her nerves were at the breaking point. She raised herself cautiously upon her elbow, determined to wait no longer. She looked toward the fire and saw that Bill Clover was looking straight at her. Her hopes died as she collapsed upon the blankets.

An instant later she heard the man Whitey emit a loud yell. Instantly her nerves and muscles became taut. The fellow was running from the fire, straight away from where she lay.

"What's the matter? What is it?" Clover called loudly.

"Right over there—somebody on horseback," Whitey shouted back. "Come on!"

Gale, watching breathlessly, saw Clover hesitate a moment; then the man started after his fellow guard. Silently Gale slid out of the blankets and tensed for a swift dash to freedom the instant Bill Clover disappeared from sight.

"Hey, come back, you fools—it's only me," a bull-like voice bellowed suddenly.

The next moment Slammer Burns rode into the firelight.

CHAPTER XII

An Unwilling Guide

LARRY EVANS slipped into the thicket only far enough to be out of sight, but not out of hearing.

"What d'yuh mean gone?" an angry voice demanded. "Yuh said yuh'd had him trussed up like a Christmas turkey."

A bleak smile crossed Larry's face as he recognized that voice. It belonged to Lusty Williams.

"I did," Fletch Lucas wailed. "Walt Hart himself done the tyin'. I dropped off tuh sleep because I was dead beat, an' when I woke up he was gone. There wasn't nothin' left but the ropes."

"Yuh damned little squirt, yuh can't han'le anythin' without makin' a bobble," another voice broke in. This time it was Mick Finn.

"I couldn't he'p it because the Far-Away Kid waylaid me, an' I thought Hart had him fixed foul," Lucas defended.

"Yeah, an' yuh thought yuh talked tuh one o' the Almonds that night yuh put the letter in their stable," Finn grated.

"I couldn't he'p that—I'd never seen Far-Away."

"Well, yo're likely tuh see him again," Finn said. "No tellin' what he'll do now."

"Maybe he'll head straight back tuh the ranch," Lusty Williams said. "If he does—good night."

"Does Jacobs know now that his precious foreman is the Far-Away Kid?" Lucas asked.

"He shore does. The Almonds waited till dark, an' when their sister didn't show up they come down an' showed that note tuh Jacobs. And is he mad? He shore won't be long jerkin' daylight under the Far-Away Kid once he gits his mitts on him," Williams said.

"Yuh think Evans would be fool enough tuh take a chance like that when he knows they may have showed Jacobs the note?" Finn sneered. "He's not that crazy."

"Then what will he do?" Lucas asked.

"Put out after the gal, if I know him," Mick Finn said. "I'd like tuh see him an' Slammer Burns meet."

"Blood on the saddle,
Bl-ood all around,
An' a great big puddle of—"

chanted Lusty Williams.

"Shut up!" Finn snarled. "This is damned serious. We've gotta decide what tuh do. If this damned little runt had stayed awake we coulda took the Far-Away Kid down there as a prisoner, an' made ourselves solid with Jacobs, while Evans was bein' hung. Where yuh reckon Slammer is now?"

"Hart said Slammer was gonna try tuh git on the track o' that gal," Lucas informed.

"Well, the girl didn't show up at home, so Slammer musta caught her again," Williams said.

"In that event he'll be takin' her tuh the hangout in Hatcher's Hole," Finn said. "Well, there's nothin' me an' Lusty kin do about it, but we'll ride over an' see if Hart is over there. The best thing fer you tuh do is hustle right over tuh the hangout too, an' tell Slammer about the Far-Away Kid bein' loose."

"Listen, boys," Lucas pleaded, "yuh've gotta help me out with a story. I wasn't tuh blame fer Far-Away gittin' away, but Slammer an' Hart may kill me fer it."

"Want us tuh take the blame? Not much!"

"Still, it is a tough break," Lusty Williams said. "I tell yuh: You tell 'em that he got away while yuh was down at the old sawmill tuh see us. We can cut the ropes so it'll look like somebody else found him, an' we'll say that yuh come right back tuh tell us an' that we've been huntin' fer him ever since."

"I guess we could do that," Finn agreed.

"I'll be yore slave fer life if yuh will," Lucas promised.

"Well, yuh'd better git goin'," Finn said. "Where's yore horse?"

"Tied up near the head o' the draw, with the Far-Away Kid's."

Larry waited to hear no more. He knew that he must get his mount if he were to have any chance at all. Fortunately he was above the men.

He soon reached the horses, and lost no time in slipping the bridle onto his own mount and getting the stake rope off its foot. Before he had finished he could hear the outlaws coming up the draw. He was about to remove the stake rope from the other animal, but thought better of it. Instead, he leaped into the saddle and took a course parallel with the hill and at an angle from the oncoming men. He dared not let his horse go faster than a walk for fear it would be heard. In the darkness the trees were an effective screen.

He heard their curses when they found that he had gotten his mount, but he didn't vary his pace, even when he heard Lusty Williams' loud voice proclaiming that he must still be in the vicinity. If they got on his trail, he was ready to shoot it out with them; but he much preferred to avoid a conflict.

Whatever the men thought, it was apparent that they realized the futility of trying to find him in the dark timber. The sound of their voices died away, and soon he was able to urge his mount to a fast trot.

There seemed to be put one place to go. He could understand now that Gale Almond had somehow contrived to elude Slammer Burns the day before, but if she had made good her escape altogether she would have reached home before this. He could conclude only that she had again fallen into the hands of Burns.

The puncher was familiar with every nook and cranny in Slide Canyon, and he had invaded Hatcher's Hole on a couple of occasions. But he knew that the task of finding Slammer Burns' hangout in that outlaw demesne, without a guide, was indeed a slim one. He had already decided who that guide was to be. Fletch Lucas would be somewhere in the canyon behind him. The only question was whether to try to follow the man, or capture him again and compel him to show the way. The latter course seemed to be the most promising.

Larry decided, however, not to be in too great haste. The narrows where he had surprised Walt Hart seemed a favorable place, but he passed that by and continued on to the extreme summit. By that time a rim of rosy haze was spreading above the eastern skyline.

Larry paused. Whichever course he decided upon, it would be better to wait until Fletch Lucas came along. He concealed his horse and came back behind a lofty escarpment beside the trail. He had brought along his lasso rope, and he was able to climb to a point about twenty feet above the trail, where he could remain well hidden behind an outjutting reef of rock.

He hadn't long to wait before he heard a horse coming up the trail. The crimson east was breaking up into gorgeous golden streaks as the sun thrust its upward way to the horizon. Soon the weak, furtive features of Fletch Lucas appeared. The fellow was forcing his mount at a speed far too fast for the steep incline. Larry could hear the animal's labored breathing far down the trail. The little outlaw was talking to himself as he rode.

"Damn the Far-Away Kid, causin' me all this trouble," Larry heard him mutter. "Like tuh cut his dawggone throat."

"Oh, yes?" Larry called out.

Lucas glanced upward in terror, and struck his mount with both spurs. The last movement was ill-advised. The fellow saw a snaky loop hissing through the air, which he was unable to dodge. The loop tightened about his middle just as his horse leaped forward. Horse and rider parted company like a limb being torn from a tree. Lucas hit the hard earth with a thud that bruised his body and jarred the wits all out of him.

"Whoa!" Larry yelled, and the outlaw's horse came to a halt and turned around, curiously eying its fallen master. The puncher came down and stood above his two times victim.

"Oh-h, I'm hurt," Lucas mourned. "My head's busted."

"That wasn't yore head yuh lit on," Larry corrected unfeelingly. "An' yuh'll git a lot o' bumpin's if yuh don't do just what I say."

"Ain't yuh done enough tuh me already?" the outlaw half sobbed.

"I ain't even begun yet," Larry said crisply. "Lucas, yo're goin' tuh show me where Slammer Burns is camped. If yuh try tuh double-cross me in any way, I'll drag yuh down to a sliver. Don't think I won't. Yore gang has got Gale Almond, an' I mean tuh git her back."

"I can't do nothin'," the fellow whined. "Yuh got my gun an' yo're bigger'n I be."

"Right. Now git on yore pins an' spraddle that horse again. We'll take our time for a while. But don't try any tricks. Yuh tell me where they are now, an' then yuh lead me there. If

we get there an' find 'em gone, it's gonna be real rough on yuh, hombre."

Fletch Lucas was thoroughly cowed, and he sensed that the man he had to deal with wasn't trifling. It was a life-and-death matter to the Far-Away Kid, and Lucas knew it. The fellow told that the Bar A cattle were supposed to be held in a little hidden valley, and he volunteered the information that the outlaw hangout was a dozen miles beyond, in the heart of Hatcher's Hole.

Larry knew enough about the country to know whether or not Lucas was choosing the best trail. And, as they occasionally ran across fresh cattle spoor, he judged that the fellow wasn't trying to deceive him.

They were riding down the bottom of a deep, narrow canyon when there suddenly came a stentorian yell from the top of a pinnacle above them.

"Hey, Slammer!" the voice yelled excitedly. "Here comes the Far-Away Kid."

CHAPTER XIII

Men with an Ancient Grudge

LARRY'S first thought was that Fletch Lucas had deliberately led him into a trap, but one look at the little outlaw's white, frightened face let him know that the appearance of the outlaws here had been as much of a surprise to him as it was to Larry. Anyway, the usefulness of Lucas was at an end.

"On yore own, hombre," Larry said. "But yuh'd better keep out of my way from now on."

There was no use to try to get out of the canyon, for he would surely be headed off any way he took. His only chance was to spur on down at top speed, and hope to find a place to elude his foes later.

He quickly left Fletch Lucas behind, and before he passed out of sight around a bend he saw that Bill Clover, the man who had yelled, had stopped to talk with Lucas. The puncher was momentarily safe, and immediately reluctance to flight took possession of him. His great enemy was Slammer Burns, and the Slammer was within hailing distance. With Burns out of the way Gale Almond would be safe. He was sure that none of the other outlaws was despicable enough to want to harm a girl. They would probably be glad to return her to her folks. If there was an exception Bill Clover was the man, and he, too, was within arm's length.

The canyon Larry was in was practically devoid of trees, but its sides were studded with outcroppings of slate and sandstone. Sometime erosions had left these projecting upwards like gigantic castles built against the side of a hill.

It was a grave emergency indeed which could cause a cowpuncher to abandon his horse, especially in such a remote, isolated place as this, but having made up his mind what to do, Larry didn't hesitate. He looped the bridle reins loosely about the saddle horn, hung the lasso rope over his left shoulder and, almost without slackening speed, landed upon his feet. For a half-minute he ran beside his horse, then gave the animal a smart rap across the rump with the coiled rope, which again put it at full speed.

Just overhead loomed one of those sandstone castles. Larry turned and backed toward its base, whipping out his tracks behind him with the rope. Once he had started to climb, he paused for nothing until he was sheltered behind the rock on a shoulder which connected it with the body of the ridge.

He had no more than gotten his breath before Bill Clover hove into sight, spurring madly. In three minutes the fellow had passed out of sight in pursuit of Larry's horse.

"Idiot," Larry commented cheerfully. This took one foe, at least, temporarily out of the picture.

Five minutes later Slammer Burns came tearing down the same way, with Fletch Lucas in his wake. Evidently the outlaw leader had delayed long

enough to get his subordinate's story.

"I'll kill yuh, Lucas, if we don't git the Far-Away Kid," Larry heard the Slammer rasp.

"We'll git him," Lucas quavered back.

The men were swinging in close to the sandstone castle. For the second time Larry decided to trust to his rope. The important thing now was to stop Slammer Burns.

Just as Burns came abreast of him, Larry straightened up in his precarious position and hurled his twine. Even as the noose left his hand Fletch Lucas emitted a screech of warning. Slammer Burns looked up quickly, but, unlike Lucas, he didn't spur his horse. Instead he sawed back on the reins so violently that his mount slid to a halt on its haunches. The rope slapped dust out of the big outlaw's hat, but the loop just missed settling over his head.

The Slammer's hand was dropping to his gun handle. Larry remembered well that despite his bulk the outlaw had the fastest hand on the draw of any man he had ever seen. Larry still had a chance to beat the man on the draw, but the shot would arouse the other outlaws, and was certain to bring Clover back. Without a single instant's hesitation Larry hurled himself downward in a drop of nearly twenty feet, straight at his foe.

For just an instant Slammer Burns was disconcerted. If he failed to get in a shot, he knew that he would be smashed to the ground. He delayed just too long to use his gun or to get his horse out of the way. He spurred frantically, but his cruelly abused animal, fearful of another jaw-breaking jerk, was slow in responding. Could Slammer have gotten out of the way so that Larry would have hit the earth, the fall would certainly have rendered the puncher helpless. But though the horse swerved, it didn't move far enough to make Larry completely lose his mark.

With a wild lunge in mid-air, Larry managed to grab the coat of Slammer Burns even as he crashed against the side of the man's horse. The outlaw had just resistance enough to break the force of the puncher's leap, but he was yanked violently out of the saddle, and both men landed in a tangled sprawl under the horse's belly. Slammer Burns was on top.

The badly scared saddle horse kicked out with both feet as it scrambled over the squirming men. Larry winced with pain as a hoof struck his thigh, but he heard his opponent give a grunt of pain at the same time, and he knew that Slammer had caught the other hoof in some part of his anatomy.

Slammer had been kicked upon the shin, and the pain caused him to relax the hold he had gotten upon Larry. With a snake-like wriggle the latter twisted out from under his muscular foe. It was well that he did. In a test of sheer strength he knew that he was no match for the burly outlaw. In his youth Slammer Burns had been a professional wrestler. It was then he had acquired his name.

Burns made a swift grab at his smaller foe and caught him by the collar. He jerked Larry to him, but Larry's fist traveled faster than the rest of his body. It drove squarely into the Slammer's mouth.

As the Slammer cursed through cut, bruised lips Larry brought the edge of his open hand down across the big man's wrist. The sharp blow made Slammer let go his hold, and Larry rolled completely free.

Larry's superior speed landed him on his feet while his foe was still on one knee. Again Slammer Burns was dragging at his gun. Larry leaped in and his fist crashed against the big man's jaw. It was a terrific punch, but Slammer refused to bow. He let go his gun, shook his head like an infuriated bull and surged to his feet.

Larry met the fellow with a barrage of punches which drove the big ex-wrestler back on his heels. A red grin gave Slammer's face a ghastly expression as he took all that Larry could

offer and poised himself for a rush as irresistible as a grizzly bear's.

"All I want is tuh git my hands on yuh, Far-Away," the big man rumbled, and leaped forward.

Larry sprang back, but he bunted into an object that suddenly thrust him forward. He had forgotten Fletch Lucas. The next moment he was caught in the mighty arms of Slammer Burns. Before he could set himself, he was lifted high and then crashed to the ground with terrific force.

It was half a minute before the puncher could get his breath back. One of his arms was twisted back in a painful hammerlock, while Slammer's hairy fist sought his throat.

"Git his gun an' fire a signal," Slammer shouted to Lucas.

Desperately Larry turned over on his side so that the gun was under him. Slammer let go of his throat, and turned in an effort to roll the puncher over on his back. Again Fletch Lucas lunged toward the gun, but at that moment Larry got one leg free, drew up his knee and kicked out just in time to meet Lucas' jaw with the heel of his boot. The little outlaw described a parabola in the air and came down upon the back of his head. He was out cold.

Larry was immeasurably encouraged by his success against Lucas. If he could keep Slammer Burns from calling the others, he might still have a chance.

Again he was being pinned by his relentless foe, but as he struggled fiercely against the gorilla strength of his antagonist, he suddenly saw the handle of Slammer's gun appear in view. With a savage jerk he freed his left arm and made a half-blind grab for the gun. He got it.

"Git up, Burns, or git a bullet through yore middle," Larry hissed.

The big outlaw froze. He could feel the muzzle of his own gun pressed against his body just above the hips.

"You shoot me an' the boys'll git yuh," the big man warned. "A shot'll bring 'em."

"I hope they don't bury us together," Larry retorted. "I'd rather let the coyotes gnaw me than tuh be in the same grave with you. Let go, an' git up. Keep yore hands where I can see 'em."

With slow, ponderous movements the big outlaw got to his feet. His small eyes glittered with almost insane hate. Just as carefully Larry got to his knees and then to his feet.

"Now Slammer, tell me where Miss Almond is," he ordered.

"Like hell I will," the outlaw jeered. "Yuh'll never see her again."

"Burns, if yuh've harmed that girl—"

"She's gone home long ago," the outlaw said. "We never did try tuh hold her."

"No? Well, I'll have a look at yore camp. You lead the way. If yuh try any foxy moves, or the others try tuh take a hand, I'll make a sieve out of yore carcass before yuh can wink."

With his own life at stake as well as Gale's, as he believed, there was no reason to suppose that Larry wouldn't make good his threat. He climbed aboard Slammer's horse and made the outlaw chief mount the one that Lucas had been riding.

"Head for that meadow valley," Larry ordered. "Lucas told me all about it."

Slammer Burns emitted an oath as he glared at his unconscious henchman, and turned back up the canyon.

There were other outlaws in the vicinity, men who wouldn't hesitate to put a rifle bullet through him at the first opportunity. Larry kept close beside his prisoner and pointed out the necessity of the outlaw obeying orders if he wished to keep on living.

They turned presently and soon were just above the outlaw camp. Larry wasn't surprised to see the Bar A cattle at the lower end of the valley.

There was nobody at the outlaw

camp, but almost at once Larry's eyes fell upon Gale's saddle.

"So Gale went home long ago, did she, Slammer?" he hissed. "Where is she?"

There was a deadly menace in his tone which struck fear to the big outlaw's heart.

"We did have her here, but it was because she follered the cattle," Slammer declared. "This mornin' she made a break an' got plumb away. I reckon Red Mulcahy musta helped her. Anyway, we was huntin' fer her when we run across you."

There was a ring of truth in the Slammer's tones; but even at that, Gale might not have gotten away. There was only one way for the puncher to assure himself that she had really escaped, and that was to go back to Clevis Creek and make sure.

Slammer Burns? Larry had no intention of letting the fellow go to be a menace to Gale, nor yet to gather his outlaws and begin more cussedness. He would have to take the man with him.

"Slammer," he said, "I want yuh tuh write an order for yore men tuh leave these cattle here. Tell 'em everythin'll be all right, and tuh wait till you get back."

"Yuh think I'm crazy?" the big outlaw sneered.

"No; that's why I think yuh'll write the note."

"Look here, Far-Away," Slammer Burns appealed. "Yuh offered tuh go in with us the other night. I admit I was sore about that twelve thousand, but I was wrong. Prob'ly yuh've done spent it. If yuh'll throw in with us now we'll say nothin' about that, an' yuh'll git yore whack at the nesters' cattle. What say?"

"What about the girl?" Larry demanded.

"Aw, shucks, I never really wanted tuh fool with her. She's gone. But before she can reach her folks, we can have these cattle where they can't be found. Yuh'll make more money in a year than yuh can in ten by runnin' straight," the tempter offered.

"Burns, yo're gonna write that order, an' then yo're comin' with me," Larry repeated. "It may not hold 'em from drivin' off the cattle, but it's worth tryin'."

"What do I git out of it?" the outlaw leader snarled.

"Slammer, I don't wanta go to the penitentiary any more than you do," Larry said. "The only thing I can do is go somewhere else an' try tuh make a fresh start. You don't deserve a break, but if the Almonds don't suffer I'll give yuh one. Otherwise, we'll both surrender an' take our chances."

Slammer Burns looked steadily at the young ex-foreman for a long minute. Finally he took the pad and pencil which Larry extended toward him and began to write. When he had finished Larry read the order, and fastened it on a tree by a broken knot. Then they rode hastily away from the camp.

CHAPTER XIV

False Friends

AT the sound of Slammer Burns' voice Gale had dropped hastily back into the blankets, but in a moment she realized her one chance to escape lay in taking advantage of the momentary confusion. It was dark where she lay, and she could take advantage of the trees. She rolled out and scampered through the grass and trees on all fours.

"What's all this ruckus about, anyway?" she heard Red's querulous tones, and saw the red-headed outlaw arising from his blankets. Naturally the others looked in his direction, and it gave Gale a chance to get to her feet and get more trees between herself and the fire.

"Where's the gal?" she heard Slammer Burns demand loudly.

"She's sleepin' right there," Clover replied.

Gale waited to hear no more. Heart

thumping like drum beats, she sped up the hill. She had just reached the top of the ridge when the sudden commotion at the camp let her know that her absence had already been discovered. Without pausing to get her breath, she ran rapidly down the slope to where she believed she would find Toppy. To her terror she missed the place.

Desperately she turned and began to search, at the same time straining her hearing to catch the first faint sound of an outlaw's approach. Five minutes were gone before she found Toppy, and then she was guided by the animal's soft nicker. Half sobbing for breath, she ran to the pony, undid the rope, and leaped upon Toppy's bare back. She had often ridden that way, and she urged the pony to a run.

By the time she was a mile away she realized that she perhaps had the two outlaws who wanted her to escape to thank for the lack of immediate pursuit. They had probably directed it out across the meadow first. But she knew that the respite wouldn't be long. Slammer Burns would soon be after her. They knew the country and she didn't. She wouldn't dare try to follow the trail, even if she could find it.

The coming of dawn compelled her to keep to the bottoms of the canyons. Her foes, she reflected, would no doubt go straight to the summit to head her off there. Once she had to cross a rocky bar when the canyon she was in ended abruptly against a shoulder of the mountain. She saw a horseman far above her, and knew that her fears had been realized. There was only one place to cross the summit; that was at the gap among the granite turrets where the cattle had been brought over. Beyond that there were at least two trails, and probably more.

Apparently the horseman had sighted her, for he was now coming her way. She urged Toppy to a lope and gained the shelter of another canyon. All the girl's instincts were to hide, and luckily the canyon she was in afforded numerous opportunities. Its rough, rocky slopes were covered with aspens and junipers, and it was all broken up by numerous spur canyons.

She rode into one of these and halted Toppy behind a thick line of aspens. She knew that she could hear any outlaws coming her way and could move to another hiding place before they could reach her. But while she was hiding the Far-Away Kid might be in danger of death for having accomplished her abduction. Somehow or other she must get over the top. There was a bare chance that Red Mulcahy might be the man stationed at the top, and he would let her pass.

She waited only long enough for Toppy to recover his wind, and then started doggedly on toward the summit. But when she reached the first open place she would have to cross she could see two or three outlaws within half a mile. They knew approximately where she was, and they would surely see her if she tried to go on.

For the first time Gale gave way to tears of vexation and anxiety. Her common sense told her that she must remain hidden where she was until the men moved farther on. Time seemed to be fairly rushing away, but still she dared not move.

Then, suddenly, there was some kind of a diversion far below her. From her hiding place she had been watching Slammer Burns. All at once she saw him turn his horse and gallop recklessly the other way. She didn't see Larry Evans because he was concealed from her view in another canyon. But it was her chance to cross the open space.

She was still a long way from the summit, and when she finally reached it she came out on the top of a sheer precipice three hundred feet high. It ran for as far as she could see, either way. Somewhere to the north was the pass. She turned Toppy along the narrow crest, which at times narrowed to a mere backbone scarcely wide enough for a horse to walk along. Such soil as might once have covered this ma-

jestic body of granite had been eroded away thousands of years before. Gale knew that she was on the very top of the world, a good ten thousand or more feet above sea level. It made her feel small and insignificant.

Suddenly she found herself blocked from another direction. Below her lay the pass, but the way down to it was obstructed by stepping stones which only a giant with seven-league boots could have negotiated. With a weak, dizzy feeling Gale realized that she would have to retrace some of her way back down the wrong side of the mountain, and then work her way along the side until she reached the pass.

Then, even as she gazed, she saw a party of more than twenty men appear from the other side. It was, she was certain, her brothers looking for her; no doubt aided by the Wineglass crew.

She cried out, but the wind was coming from the north, and at that altitude it was always strong. It hurled her words back into her teeth. But another little drama was being enacted below. She saw a single rider suddenly dash out from behind the rocks and gallop madly for shelter lower down. It was undoubtedly one of the men who had been sent to intercept her.

The fellow was seen at once by the posse, and from her point of vantage Gale could discern that he had deliberately let himself be seen, and was now leading the posse far north of the way the cattle had been taken.

There was small chance that the posse could overhaul this man in his own territory, but they all tore after him, and Gale could see the spurts of smoke from their guns as they fired at the fugitive from long range. It brought a feeling of excitement pulsing through her veins. She screamed out at the top of her voice again and again, but with no result.

She had dismounted from Toppy in order to get nearer the pass. Now she ran back and leaped upon the pony with unconscious, effortless grace, and began frantically trying to seek a way down.

Gale had gotten back down to a place where the trail seemed open to the pass, when she saw two riders passing not far below her. She studied them a moment to make sure that she hadn't been mistaken in her recognition. They were Wineglass riders, and though she had once held them as enemies she was sure that they must now be out on the trail of the rustlers. One of them, Lusty Williams, had called several times at the ranch and had seemed friendly. She headed Toppy down the slope at an angle, and presently was close enough to the men to make them hear her voice.

Finn and Williams paused to await her arrival, and the looks of amazement hadn't left their faces when she stopped.

"Gale! Where did yuh come from?" Williams asked.

"I followed those outlaws with our cattle, and they caught me, but I got away again. A fellow called Red helped me," she said. "I was trying to get over the pass when I saw a posse."

"Yes; that's yore brothers an' the rest of the Wineglass outfit," Finn answered. "They're after the Far-Away Kid's gang. We figgered they might be takin' the posse off on a wrong scent, so we scouted over here."

"They are," Gale informed. "But the Far-Away Kid isn't the leader. He isn't even an outlaw. I found that out. I was afraid he might have fallen into the posse's hands and—and—"

"Mebbe he ain't an outlaw, but he's actin' dang queer," Mick Finn said. "It shore looked like he'd kidnaped you. Anyway, he's disappeared. We ain't seen nothin' of him."

He wasn't dead! For the moment that was all that mattered to Gale.

"I can tell you where the outlaw camp is," she said. "Can't we find the others an' recover our cattle before the outlaws get away with them?"

"That's an idee," Finn said. "But we can't overtake the posse. Tell yuh

what we'll do: You take us down to the outlaw camp, an' then we'll send up a smoke signal that'll bring the posse on a run."

Though Gale was inclined to demur at first, they overpowered her with arguments which really seemed logical. And she felt that only through their cooperation could the Bar A cattle be recovered. Both men assured her that they could protect her if the necessity arose.

They turned and rode toward the meadow valley at a fast trot. It didn't occur to Gale that the men seemed to need little guiding until they suddenly struck a well defined trail into which they turned without hesitation.

"Wait!" she cried. "How did you know about that trail?"

"Why, we've rode this country before," Lusty said.

"I don't think your plan is a good one," she said. "I'm going to try to find my brothers."

"No, yo're not, sister—yo're comin' with us," Mick Finn told her bluntly. "I got a notion yuh may come in handy. Besides, I reckon Slammer Burns'll be glad tuh see yuh again."

A mist floated before Gale's eyes. The ground seemed to be whirling crazily around her, then all went dark. Mick Finn caught her in his arms as she started to fall, and lifted her to the front of his own saddle.

"Come on," the outlaw said. "We ain't got no time for fool faints."

When Gale opened her eyes again she was back at the outlaw camp in the meadow valley.

The first persons she saw were Finn and Williams. But other outlaws grouped about her curiously as she sat up. Among them she recognized the quarter-breed, Hart, who had first prevented her from reaching home. She recognized Clover, Whitey, and Bisbee, and there was another small fellow whom she had never before seen. This was Fletch Lucas. Slammer Burns wasn't there, but neither was Red Mulcahy.

"I tell yuh we've wasted time enough," Gale heard the grating voice of Walt Hart say. "We'd better git them cows tuh movin'. We kin have 'em in the Hole in three hours, an' then we can hold that damned Wineglass outfit off till they starve, if need be."

"But this note is in Slammer's han'writin', an' it says tuh wait," came Clover's voice.

"An' I say that the Far-Away Kid musta got the best o' Slammer an' made him write it, or the Slammer'd be here," Fletch Lucas declared.

"'Tain't possible the Far-Away Kid coulda licked Slammer," Clover maintained.

"Anyway, this posse ain't foolin'," Lusty Williams said. "It's hangin' fer all of us if we're caught."

"What did yuh fools wanta come here for?" somebody asked.

"Think we was gonna stay there an' have the Far-Away Kid denounce us when they caught him? He knows damned well that we're in with yuh. Things are too scary," Lusty Williams said.

"They'll be a damned sight scarier if we don't git outa here," Hart snapped.

"Hey, look! Ain't that Slammer comin' now?" an outlaw called.

"Shore is," Clover said with relief.

Gale's heart sank. There had been some hope so long as the foul outlaw leader himself wasn't there.

"Where yuh been, Slammer?" an outlaw asked eagerly as the big outlaw rode up.

"What was the idee tryin' tuh hold these cattle here, with the Wineglass bunch on our tails?" Hart demanded fiercely.

"Hold yo' hawsses," Slammer commanded. "Why, hello, girlie. Decided yuh'd come back tuh old Slammer, eh? That's where yo're smart."

"You'd better let me go," Gale threatened impotently.

"What about that note, Slammer?" Bisbee persisted.

"You fools oughta knowed enough tuh git them cows tuh travelin'," Slammer snarled. "That damned Far-Away got my gun when we was fightin', an' made me leave that."

"How'd yuh git away?" Clover asked.

"The fool seen that posse an' turned me loose so's he could go after 'em," Slammer guffawed.

"Why, Pat Jacobs'll hang him higher'n a gate post," Mick Finn exploded into laughter.

"Of course he will," Slammer said. "They'll think he's just tryin' tuh lead 'em into a trap. But we gotta git busy an' git these cattle on intuh the Hole, where we kin hold Jacobs an' his gang off if we have tuh."

"That's what I been tellin' 'em fer an hour," Walt Hart said angrily.

"All right, git busy," Slammer rasped. "I'm takin' me li'l' gal, an' headin' straight tuh the hangout. Lucas, yuh louse, you come with me."

The little outlaw scrambled for a horse. While Gale was being compelled to mount Toppy again, she heard Bill Clover telling Slammer about Red Mulcahy, to which Finn and Williams added their tale.

"He's been a trouble-maker ever since he joined the gang," the Slammer cursed. "This'll be the last time. When he dodges that posse an' joins us again Hart, yuh let him have it right between the shoulders. Red talks too much, anyway."

So another man was to be murdered because he had tried to befriend her, Gale thought helplessly. She looked at Whitey, but Red's friend's face was stony. He wouldn't dare interfere.

"Here, Whitey, gimme that sixgun o' yore's," Slammer Burns ordered. "You kin use a rifle tuh fight the posse, an' neither me ner Fletch has got a weapon."

The outlaw leader confiscated Lusty Williams' rifle, and, thus equipped, he conducted Gale rapidly toward the lower end of the meadow valley, with Fletch Lucas bringing up the rear.

Gale hadn't been bound, and she sat very straight in the saddle. There seemed no way to escape, but she meant to cast herself over the first precipice they encountered. Nothing, she vowed, could compel her to endure again the vile touch of Slammer Burns' dirty paws.

CHAPTER XV

The Decoy

LARRY'S first view of the posse occurred when the men were sweeping down from the pass in pursuit of Red Mulcahy. The puncher knew that it was a deliberate ruse on the part of the outlaw to lead the men astray in a wild labyrinth of deep-cut chasms where they would be involved for the remainder of the day. By that time the outlaws would have ample time to make away with the cattle.

Larry had reason to believe that the posse hadn't met Gale, else they would have turned the other way; part of them at least.

As he had told Slammer Burns, he had no wish to go to the penitentiary, and he was aware that he probably wouldn't live long enough for that anyway, if he joined the posse. Pat Jacobs and the others would believe him guilty of cattle stealing and kidnaping, and they would give him short shift.

There was but one thing to do. He had promised Slammer Burns a chance for liberty, but there had been a grim smile on his face when he had allowed the outlaw leader to go. Then, setting spurs to his mount, he galloped straight down the ridge above the canyon into which the posse had disappeared.

Presently he saw part of the men far below, and he abandoned the top of the ridge to take a breakneck ride down the slope until he was almost within shouting distance of the men below. Jerking out one of the captured sixguns, he fired two shots into the air, and then reloaded as he went along.

He was seen instantly and recognized. In two minutes the entire posse had changed directions, and was riding to head him off.

With a grim smile Larry straightened his course so that his horse was running horizontally along the ridge. Most of the possemen were now trying to climb straight out of the canyon in order to get within range of him, but he noticed that two men were taking a course parallel with him, though much farther down. That was the Almond brothers. If they believed he had kidnaped their sister, he could expect no mercy from them, and their actions indicated that they were preparing for a long chase.

A volley of bullets exploded around him as he swept just above the posse. The men had to shoot straight up the hill, and their horses were jumping like jack-rabbits. Consequently their marksmanship was poor. Larry ran the gauntlet of a short-gun fire unscathed, and with a wave of his hat and a taunting yell he galloped on to the top of the ridge.

Behind him raced the posse, strung out now in varying lines along the ridge.

The Far-Away Kid had always been known as a reckless rider, and he outdid himself now. Not a man in the posse dared follow him at the pace he set. Without checking his horse's speed, he forced his way through three clumps which lashed at him like quirts in the hands of invisible fiends. He lifted his horse over rocks where a fall would have meant a bone-breaking spill, or raced around narrow deer trails where, had his mount slipped, it would have rolled halfway to the bottom of the canyon.

Such riding quickly took him out of danger, except for the two Almond boys who were riding almost as recklessly, and were intent upon intercepting him at some point lower down.

Thus far the puncher's plans were working out. He was leading the posse by a safe distance, and he slowed down enough to encourage them to continued pursuit. He knew that he had been recognized, and their efforts to shoot him out of the saddle explained their attitude.

If he could toll them along far enough without disaster, he would lead them eventually into the canyon through which the Bar A cattle would have to be driven. And if Slammer Burns' note had delayed the rustlers as he hoped, the posse would strike that canyon ahead of the cattle. If he could get that far he felt confident of his own ability to elude both posse and outlaws, but those two parties would be certain to meet. When they did there would be very little chance for Slammer Burns and his crew to escape.

Presently he saw that the Almond brothers were indeed a menace. They were below him but gradually veering over to make him turn. Now he had to let his foaming horse out at full speed. As he dashed over into the head of a draw that would lead him into the canyon for which he had been aiming, the Almonds were almost within sixgun range. He waved his hat for them to come on, and then waved a white handkerchief as a sign of truce, but they ignored his every signal and proceeded with one, single, deadly purpose.

Fortunately for Larry, the horse he had confiscated from Slammer Burns was superior to those of his enemies, and fresher. He was soon at a safe distance and he held the pace. It was a narrow, crooked canyon where the chase took place, and he was never in sight long enough to allow his pursuers to shoot at him with a rifle. Larry's only real fear was that the rustlers would take alarm if the posse started to shoot.

Suddenly his horse shot out into the canyon in which he believed the cattle would be. He looked for cow tracks, but saw none. Then a startled yelp made him look quickly to the left. Less than fifty feet distant he saw Slammer

Burns, Fletch Lucas, and Gale Almond.

"Gale!" he cried, then gave his rearing, plunging mount the spurs as he saw Slammer's gun coming up.

Even as his horse leaped forward, Larry heard the crack of his enemy's gun and felt a burning pain across the back of his shoulders.

His own hand had dropped gunward, and he swung his mount about to face his foe while the animal was still on its hind legs. But now Slammer Burns was whirling his horse around, and with a bound the outlaw had placed Gale between him and Larry. The latter fired, but fear of hitting Gale caused him to miss.

Slammer Burns had no such scruples. His bullets were whizzing past the girl's head, and only the gyrations of his own and Larry's horse prevented him from getting the puncher. Larry felt one bullet rip through his clothes; another splattered against the fork of his saddle. But with superb horsemanship Larry compelled his mount to face the flaming gun, and in three seconds was within a rod of Gale.

Suddenly Burns' horse became uncontrollable as its agitated master spurred and jerked in his effort to keep Gale in front of him as a shield. The girl at the same time was doing her level best to get out of the way. The animal reared and then lunged forward, straight at Toppy. The little brown pony was bowled over by the impact.

Larry heard Gale scream as her horse went down, but he didn't look. He was conscious only that she was no longer between him and his foe. He could see the evil, grotesque grin upon the outlaw leader's face as Slammer thrust his gun muzzle toward him. But Slammer Burns' huge torso at that range was a mark which he couldn't miss. He pulled the trigger, saw an amazed look on his enemy's face, and, to his own vast consternation, felt himself falling through space. Then came oblivion.

WHEN Larry revived his sudden jerk brought out an involuntary, "Ouch!" He dropped back and reached for the back of his head, which be believed somebody had just hit with a hammer. His hand encountered another, a small soft one.

Opening his eyes, he looked into Gale's face. He realized presently that he was lying on the ground, with his head in her lap.

"What happened?" he asked. "Wasn't yuh hurt when—when yore horse fell?"

"No; but you were hurt when yours did," Gale said. "It reared just in time to get shot in the head. It fell over so swiftly that your head struck a rock. Oh, I was afraid you'd been badly hurt."

"I've had lesser things happen to me at that," Larry said ruefully. "Where's the others?"

"When I made them understand that the cattle were above here they went up to head off the rustlers," Gale said. "All except my brothers. They wouldn't leave me alone again."

Suddenly Marve and Ed Almond stepped into view. Their faces were a bit sheepish.

"Yuh shore led us a hell of a chase, Evans," Ed said, "but I reckon now yuh done it deliberate."

"I did. But I'm glad I was able tuh keep ahead till I met Gale."

"I reckon yuh wouldn't have lasted long," Ed admitted. "Even Gale had a hard time convincin' Jacobs yuh wasn't a rustler."

"No; I'm not a rustler," Larry said slowly. He had meant to ride on out of the country, begin life anew and try to forget Gale Almond. He knew now that flight was impossible.

Presently he was able to sit up. His head had been bandaged, and the wound across his shoulders was too slight to be noticed.

"What's that over there?" he asked suddenly.

"That's Slammer Burns," Gale said in a low tone. "You got him with your one shot."

"Evans, if there's anythin' we can do—" Ed Almond began tentatively.

"Has Gale told yuh about me helpin' this gang rob the Springdell bank?" Lary asked.

"Yeah, she did," the man admitted. "If there's any danger of yuh havin' tuh go over the road, an' yuh wanta run for it—"

"No, thanks," Larry declined. "I'll not run."

Half an hour later the posse, led by Pat Jacobs, returned. They had seven outlaw prisoners. The surprise had been complete; the outlaws hadn't fired a shot. Red Mulcahy was the only man who had escaped. Gale, at least, was secretly glad that he had.

"Well, Evans," Pat Jacobs said, "I been huntin' yuh tuh hang yuh. I guess I was wrong. So far as I can tell, yuh've been more than square ever since yuh've been with the Wineglass. But these men say that yuh used to be a member of the gang, and that yo're wanted for bank robbery and other crimes. Got anythin' tuh say about it?"

Gale stepped in front of the puncher. "You've got no right to badger him this way. He's been badly hurt. And if it hadn't been for him, you wouldn't have got your rustlers and we wouldn't have got our cattle back."

"We're backin' Evans, Jacobs," Ed Almond said. "We ain't got too much love for you, anyway. We ain't forgot that yo're tryin' to run us outa the country."

"Forgit it," Jacobs snapped. "I reckon this'll clean out the rustlers. Maybe we need you people on the Gammon ranch tuh make sure it don't fall into bad hands again. Larry suggested that I sell yuh a water right. I will. And I was only wantin' tuh give Larry a chance tuh state his case. We ain't tryin' him for any bank robbery."

"Thanks, Pat," Larry smiled. "That's all I could have asked of yuh. Except, that I want yuh tuh promise that there won't be any hangin' of these men. Let the law take its course. As for me, I'll take my medicine about the bank."

"Why shouldn't he?" Bill Clover interjected angrily. "We got away with twelve thousand dollars, an' that dirty crook stole the whole caboodle from the rest of us."

"Is that right, Larry?" Jacobs asked.

"That's right," Larry acknowledged. "Gale, I stole it from 'em the night after we had dinner at yore place. I didn't join 'em until they was asleep. Then I hocked the sack the money was in an' beat it."

"And where's the money?" Jacobs asked harshly.

"I sent it back to the bank we got it from, the next day."

"Why, that's right," Marve Almond spoke up. "I remember hearin' that the Springdell Bank got the money back some time after the robbery!"

"How did yuh come tuh git mixed up in a racket like that?" Jacobs inquired.

"It was this way," Larry explained. "When I was a kid I had a row with my stepdad. I left home, and the next night he was murdered. They accused me, and they had evidence enough tuh convict. I had tuh run for it, and Slammer Burns and his gang helped me git away from a sheriff, an' later they helped me hide out. When they come North, I came with 'em. That's when I got the name of the Far-Away Kid.

"I knew they wasn't straight, but I didn't have any chance tuh quit the bunch. Then they pulled the Springdell job. They didn't let me intuh their plans, an' the first I knowed of it was when they rushed around a corner tuh where they'd told me tuh hold the horses while they got some mail they was expectin'.

"There was some shootin', an' I knew if I was caught I'd be sent back tuh stand trial for that murder. We all rode like hell and threw the posse off our trail. Then Slammer Burns explained tuh me that it was a bank job. He told me I'd git my whack, but that I'd have tuh ride with the gang. Under the circumstances, I thought I'd

just as well. Then—somethin' happened."

"What?" Gale asked eagerly.

"I met you. I made up my mind tuh get that money back to the bank and then go straight. I did it. Now it's up to the bank," Larry said.

"I'll bet anythin' yuh like they'll offer yuh a reward instead of tryin' tuh send yuh tuh the pen," Jacobs said. "But what about that murder charge? That looks dang serious tuh me."

"I got word from there a year ago that a Mexican my stepdad had mistreated shamefully confessed tuh the murder," Larry stated. "I'm not worried about that."

"Well, folks," Jacobs said, "the sun is gittin' low. We'll have tuh make a night camp back there on that meadow valley. Then we'll trail these cattle back tomorrow."

It was after dark before the party returned to the meadow where the outlaws had camped. They had driven the cattle back before them. Somehow, when it grew dusk Larry and Gale became separated from the rest, though they saw the two Almond boys riding with Pat Jacobs with perfect amiability on both sides.

"Well, I reckon this has cleared things up at least," Larry murmured. "If they don't send me over the road for that bank job, I'll still have my job at the Wineglass, an' you folks will have no more trouble, either."

"If they try to do anything to you after you sent back that money, they'll be meaner than Slammer Burns," Gale said hotly.

"I reckon I never was much afraid of that," Larry laughed. "I knew that if it come out I'd lose my job, and under any other circumstances I would. But I was afraid that when a certain little girl found out that the man she kissed that afternoon was a bank robber, that she'd hate him. That's why I didn't go back before to find yuh. I wanted tuh change enough that yuh wouldn't recognize me."

"As if you could," Gale scoffed. Her tone changed abruptly. "Do you really mean that you meant to come back to me—some day?" she asked wistfully.

"I did. Girl, yuh saved me from myself. I loved yuh that day I helped yuh get the dinner, and I never got over it."

"Yet you didn't know me when you saw me, and I did know you," she chided.

"And yuh made me feel like a bigamist because I fell in love with yuh all over again," he laughed.

Their horses lurched together and, as though at a given signal, stopped. Everybody else had passed out of sight. Larry's arm moved out circlewise, and a slender form swayed to meet it. Their lips met in a long kiss.

"It seems but yesterday since I kissed yuh before," Larry murmured.

In the Next Issue

An Ace in the Hole

Purty near the funniest yarn
you've ever read

By WILLIAM FREEMAN HOUGH

Outlawed

By Thomas Grant Springer

THEY rode the range with every change
Swapping brands and weather,
From Pecos dust to Wyoming crust,
Always the two together.
They swam wet hides and took rough rides
With sheriffs close behind,
Or punched straight brands like good cowhands,
One in body and mind.
They took their way and shared their pay,
Outfit or warbag or rope,
Be it drink for drink or wink for wink,
Gunplay or amorous hope.
With the bunkhouse crew they were one, not two,
Stud poker or frolic or fight.
If it wasn't night herd you can take my word
One blanket would do at night.
From the Rio Grand' to the cold North land
They rustled or worked or rode.
When it came to a pinch or a broken cinch,
One cayuse carried the load.
To the Circle U up rode these two
To sign on a pleasant range;
It was all fence feed with a fancy breed,
So they settled down for a change.
They were quiet a while and then a smile
Flashed out of the kitchen door;
A red head tossed and both were lost
As they never had been before.
So Bill hung round when Bud was bound
Afar for a bunch of strays,
And Bud wall-eyed while Bill was tied
To his bunk a couple of days.

When each one found the other bound
On a quest he thought his own,
They split as wide as a canyonside,
And each one went alone.
The gal, she laid her bets and played
Her favors here and there
Till Bud and Bill with right good will
Got into each other's hair.
In the horse corral they each one fell
In a none too sweet embrace;
And, forgetting guns, these loving ones
Hammered each other's face.
The foreman grabbed the pair and nabbed
The guns they both forgot,
Or they might have drawn and someone gone
The long trail, like as not.
Then the foreman chaffed the girl and laughed
At the brand that each one wore,
Which gave an excuse for a lot of use
He made of the kitchen door.
So at snowfall when strays and all
Were brought to the close home range
Why Bud and Bill, both grouchy still,
Were looking for a change.
They took their pay, then rode away
And never looked behind;
Though not a word they spoke or heard
Each knew the other's mind.
In the world of men they're pards again,
Mavericks without a brand,
An outlaw pair with unsinged hair
And never broke to stand.

Road Ranch Rebel

By Cliff Walters

When first she looked into the eyes of that stalwart son of the range, Joyce knew that she was no longer an unhappy, homeless waif. And yet some strange conflict of emotions made her refuse to admit that love had at last come to her lonely heart.

"WELL, here we are, young lady."

As the grizzled driver making this announcement drew his team to a halt in front of the rambling log building, Joyce Dorne hopped nimbly from the buckboard. The slim, blue-eyed girl stood there taking in the surroundings curiously: The sunlit riffles of Willow Creek, the trees, the weather-beaten sign across the paintless false front of the building which said "Ganert's Road Ranch."

"There comes yore uncle now." The driver, having removed his passenger's two bags from the dusty buckboard, pointed toward the barn.

Joyce turned quickly. But, as she looked for the first time in her life at Dave Ganert, the smile left her face. A feeling of disappointment smote her as she intently watched this tall, stooped, sallow-visaged man coming toward her. Could this be the uncle who. . . .

"Howdy," the latter greeted, appraising her with narrowed close-set eyes. Nor did he proffer his bony hand as he went on, "Reckon yo're Owen Dorne's girl."

"Yes, I—I am." Joyce essayed a shy smile. "You see, I didn't get any answer to the letter I wrote you after Dad died. But when the bank came and took everything, there wasn't much I could do only come on over here. I hope you don't mind—Uncle Dave?"

Ganert shrugged his drooping shoulders. "What difference does that make now?" he asked. "Yo're here, ain't yuh?"

As she met those emotionless, gray eyes, Joyce wanted to throw her two

grips back into the buckboard. But, remembering that it would take her last three dollars to pay the stage driver, she swallowed her pride, just as she had swallowed it when necessity had forced her to come, uninvited, to the sheltering roof of her only relative.

"I'll earn my room and board," she said almost defiantly. "I'm willing to work at anything. I can cook and wash and—"

"Huh!" her uncle interrupted. "I got a picture of you doin' the cookin' fer the gang that stops here every once in a while! Nope. I've got a wife that handles that part of it. Rosita'd make two of you."

"Your wife?" repeated the girl in an awed tone of voice. "Why, I didn't know that you'd married again!"

"Why shouldn't I?" Dave Ganert wanted to know. "Just 'cause Owen Dorne's sister happened to die off ain't no sign I had to go on batchin' it fer the rest of my life, is it?"

"No, of course not."

"All right. Fetch yore junk in. I'll see if Rosita can fix yuh up with a room."

The crestfallen girl was just stooping to pick up the two heavy grips when a drawling voice said:

"Carry yore bags, lady?"

Turning quickly, Joyce found herself staring at a tall young puncher whose broad shoulders tapered down to a slim waistline; a young man whose lean, handsome face was tanned almost to the color of saddle leather, and whose dark eyes were challengingly direct. He didn't wait for her answer, this son of the badlands. He caught up the bags, then relinquished them as suddenly. For Dave Ganert, in a far less glacial tone than he had employed while addressing Joyce, was saying:

"Hello, Matt! By golly, yo're just in time to meet my niece, Joyce Dorne. Uh—this is Matt Parrish, Joyce. He owns the Double Arrow outfit up on the head of Willow Crick, and that's one of the biggest cow outfits in the country."

Young Parrish, exposing a shock of wavy, brown hair as he removed his hat, bowed to the smiling girl. But before either of them could speak, Ganert continued:

"Joyce is comin' here to live with us, Matt. Yuh see, her dad and my first wife was brother and sister. We're mighty glad to have her, too."

"I should think yuh would be," the youthful cattleman answered, his dark eyes revealing admiration as he contemplated Joyce's oval face within its soft frame of golden hair. Then, rather incredulously, he blurted, "Are yuh sure this girl's yore niece, Dave?"

"Sure!" the other replied, a twisted smile on his thin lips. "But you two young folks go on in and git better acquainted. I'll pack these grips." And while Joyce, mutely wondering what had precipitated her uncle's abrupt change of manner, walked along beside Matt Parrish she found herself forgetting the chilly reception she had received. Perhaps the warmth radiating from her companion's smile had something to do with that.

As they entered the building, the girl observed that the big front room, with its barren log walls, poker table and bar, was nothing more than a saloon. Again revulsion smote her. Then a buxom, black-haired woman appeared in the doorway leading to the other part of the building. And Ganert, dropping his niece's luggage, introduced Rosita, his Mexican wife.

The latter, her face inscrutable, seemed neither to approve nor resent the fact that Joyce was coming to live with them. Only once did she express any outward emotion. And that was when she flashed a smile at Matt Parrish.

MATT accepted Dave Ganert's invitation to remain for supper at the road ranch that evening. During the meal Joyce learned that the young man had inherited the Double Arrow

Ranch and cattle from his father, "Rawhide" Parrish, who had been the first settler in Casper Basin.

"Yep," Ganert explained to the girl. "Old Rawhide took up all the good land in this Basin. But he turned up missin' about a month ago. Matt there happened to be away at the time, roundin' up some dogies over in the Sandrock Breaks country. Most of us figgers old Rawhide met with foul play. Maybe somebody plugged him."

"I don't," Matt said, without raising his eyes from his plate. "I don't know of anybody but what liked Dad. I figure he'll come back one of these days."

"Yo're locoed!" Ganert snorted. "I've told yuh that a hundred times, Matt. Hell's bells! Yore pa never strayed off fer a month before, did he?"

"No-o." The young man shook his dark head slowly.

Later, Joyce found that supper was more or less of a relay proposition at the Ganert Road Ranch. As the sun shot its reddened rays across the hills, a freight outfit rolled up to the barn down on the creek bank. Hardly had the weary teams been unharnessed before an old prospector, leading a pack train of burros, came splashing across the stream. And with dusk came a pair of hungry cowpunchers who, after having finished riding a six weeks' round-up over in the Horse River country, were heading for the town of Rock Trail which lay thirty miles to the east.

This was the crew that convened in Ganert's barroom after they had eaten their fill. Joyce, talking to Matt under the big willow tree near the building, could hear the clink of glasses that accompanied laughter which was ever growing louder and louder. At last the girl heard her uncle calling to her.

"Yes?" she said, walking over to where the latter waited for her.

Ganert's voice was again cold, his gray eyes narrowed as he began:

"Yuh said when yuh first come today that yuh was willin' to work fer yore keep. All right. That's no more'n fair—and I'm takin' yuh up on it."

"But, I—I wanted to help Rosita in the kitchen," Joyce replied. "She wouldn't let me. She told me to keep out of that part of the house."

"There's other parts to this house," her uncle reminded. "The main part—after dark—is the front. In there where them hombres is drinkin' up. They're all primed to set in a poker game now. And I could set in with 'em if I didn't have to keep dishin' up glasses of whiskey. There's yore chance to help out, if yo're work-brittle. Come on in. Anybody can do it."

A shudder of revulsion swept over Joyce. "Please, Uncle Dave," she said in a low, strained voice, "anything but that! I—I couldn't. Please don't ask—"

"Hold on!" he commanded sharply. "Nobody's goin' to harm yuh in there. Yo're my niece, ain't yuh? All right. Come on down off'n yore high horse. Anybody in yore fix ought to be glad to help out, and without havin' to be told that beggars ain't choosers. If the idee hurts yore pride a little, just remember that folks with pride don't take charity."

"I'm not begging for charity!" The girl's well moulded mouth was suddenly firm as she fought to keep the tears back. "I'll pay my way even if—if I have to tend bar!"

"Now yo're talkin' sense," the crafty-eyed Ganert applauded. "Come on in. The boys is waitin' fer me." And he led the way.

Though two bright spots of humiliation glowed on Joyce's youthful cheeks, she followed her uncle behind the bar in the front room where the latter explained her duties. Then Ganert took a seat at the big poker table about which were already grouped the old prospector, the freighters and cowpunchers. Suddenly the girl glanced up to see Matt Parrish framed in the doorway, and the two spots on her cheeks glowed even a deeper red as

she noticed the young man's look of surprise.

Slowly then he approached the bar, his spur rowels tinkling faintly. His dark eyes met hers as he said:

"What are yuh doin' here, Joyce? This is no place for you."

"On the contrary," she replied with a noticeable trace of irony in her tone, "this seems to be about the only place for me."

"Not by a darn sight!" Matt's voice was low, yet firm. "I've got a ranch. Come on up there till—" He stopped abruptly, embarrassed.

"I'm afraid there's nothing you can do, Matt," she said, disconsolately.

"And again, maybe there is," he answered. "Listen, Joyce. I tried to tell yuh somethin' when we were outdoors, somethin' yuh ought to know, but Dave called yuh away from me. Yuh can't stay around this place. It ain't fit for you, nor any other decent person."

"Then why do you patronize it?" she countered. "From what Uncle Dave says, you've been one of his best customers ever since you inherited the Double Arrow Ranch."

Matt hesitated a moment. "Yes, but yo're a girl and—"

His words were drowned by Dave Ganert's booming voice calling:

"More drinks, Joyce! The boys all want another round. And hurry it up. Hey, Matt! Buy a stack of chips and set into this game. Maybe yore luck'll turn tonight."

"Who knows?" the young puncher responded, turning away from the bar. "All right, Dave. Deal me in."

One more sharp twinge of disappointment assailed Joyce as she watched Matt Parrish take his place among those gruff, half-drunken men at the poker table. Disgust followed disappointment in this instance; then came anger. For a brief moment she was tempted to shout: "You're as bad as the rest of them, Matt Parrish! Well, play poker and drink hard liquor if you want to! Squander what you've inherited, then maybe you'll get some sense into your handsome head!"

Yet the girl said nothing. With nervous fingers she filled the empty glasses about the table and went back behind the bar again.

The click of poker chips went on; the scraping of boot heels against chair rungs; loud, raucous laughter and incessant talk until it seemed to the tense Joyce that she would go mad in this smoke-clouded room. Driven to the verge of distraction, she felt like bolting out into the night; out where the tranquil stars beckoned and where the sage-perfumed night breeze stirred, with its cooling caress, the leaves of the big willow tree near the west window.

Jingling spur rowels called Joyce's attention to a new comer entering the doorway. The latter, a heavy-set young man, focused his pale blue eyes on the girl while Dave Ganert, without rising from his chair, introduced him as "Orville Trink, the other cowman of Casper Basin."

Trink acknowledged the introduction by touching a blunt forefinger to the brim of his hat. Then, bracing his elbows on the bar, he said:

"I'll have a whiskey from the purtiest barkeep that ever poured one. Fact is, I might have several. And if all the other boys feel the same way I do, Dave's liquor business ought to pick up considerable from now on."

Joyce forced a smile, thinking that the flashily dressed Trink was probably trying to offer a compliment. Yet she couldn't help resenting it when he continued:

"Old Dave's purty foxy, ain't he? Importin' a beautiful blonde so as to drum up his business. Huh! And interducin' her as his niece!"

"I am his niece," the girl affirmed coolly. "I'm going to stay here until—" She hesitated.

"Until when?" the young cattleman prompted. "Now don't start hurtin' my feelin's right off the bat by tellin' me yo're leavin' the Basin—ever. I

got a different notion about that the minute I laid eyes on yuh. Er—we didn't shake hands yet, did we? Well, s'posin' we do?"

As Joyce hesitated, Trink suddenly reached across the bar, caught her hand and started drawing her toward him.

"Aw, now," he chided, grinning. "Don't act like a bashful little schoolgirl. Yuh'll get over that if yuh tend bar fer Dave Ganert very long, and—"

"I believe," said a drawling voice, "that it's the lady's place to offer her hand first."

Both Joyce and Trink turned to see Matt Parrish sauntering forward.

"Oh, so that's it?" Trink retorted, releasing the girl's hand. "Yuh saw her first, did yuh, Parrish?"

"Right," the other answered, his eyes level, accusing. "And I staked my claim. Priority holds, too, as yuh'll find out by askin' the prospectin' gent with the white beard over there."

"Get away from me. Both of you!" the enraged Joyce cried. "I'm not a claim, and I'm not going to be 'staked' by either one of you! I'm sick of this room and the people in it already. I'm going out!"

And, while her uncle stared with the rest of them, the tormented girl hurried out the front door. Nor did she stop until she had walked for nearly a mile down the bank of Willow Creek. Here, alone with her thoughts, she slumped down on the grassy turf bordering the stream and gave way to the tears she had striven so valiantly to fight back ever since her arrival in Casper Basin. When finally her weeping ceased, she pillowed her golden head on her clasped hands and lay there, looking up at the star-sprinkled sky. Surely there must be some place for her besides Dave Ganert's barroom, she reasoned. But, though she strove hard to think clearly, the only thing that presented an alternative was Matt Parrish's suggestion that she move up to the Double Arrow Ranch.

What had he meant by that proposal? Yet, what difference did it make! He was like the rest of those men back there, Joyce reflected bitterly. He was even worse! Endowed with a rugged handsomeness, an engaging smile and the quiet mannerisms of a gentleman that had power to stir the heart of any girl, he had disproved —to Joyce, at least—the sincerity of his "gentlemanly" attributes by his actions tonight. He had boldly proclaimed, and without any provocation whatever, that he had "staked" Joyce. Well, she would see about that!

At last the miserable, homeless girl rose and started slowly back to the road ranch. The lights were out in the front room when she returned. Heavy snoring, that of drunken men, emanated from the long, squat building used as a bunkhouse. Yet one of Ganert's overnight guests, the elderly prospector, hadn't reached his sleeping quarters, Joyce observed. The old man lay sprawled in a drunken stupor near the main building, his wallet protruding from his hip pocket; a wallet hurriedly replaced by Dave Ganert whose tall, stooped figure disappeared around a convenient corner as Joyce approached the scene.

If she shuddered with disgust, at least the girl wasn't surprised. No doubt her uncle's nefarious business was to relieve his guests of their money. And if he couldn't accomplish this at the poker table, he would do it another way, and with comparative safety. After all, it would be difficult for a drunken man to remember exactly how much money he had lost the night before at gambling.

But the despairing girl was due for still another surprise. As she started into the little cabin that had been assigned to her by Rosita, a stolidly built figure rose from a chair in a darkened corner of the room.

"You!" Joyce exclaimed, recognizing Orville Trink.

"Yeah, me," he answered, thickly. "I've been waitin' fer yuh, goldilocks."

"Get out of here!" she flared. "If you don't, I'll call Uncle Dave!"

Trink laughed shortly. "Well, call him. And I'll bet he don't hear yuh."

"I thought I saw yuh headin' for home, Trink!"

At the sound of that drawling voice, both Joyce and the man confronting her turned to see Matt Parrish standing just outside the doorway, his tall, erect figure silhouetted against the haze of starlight.

"Yeah, and I thought I seen *you* headin' fer home!" Trink rasped. Then, in a strained tone, he went on, "Listen here, Matt. You and me have allus been purty good friends, as well as neighbors. I hope yuh ain't goin' to let little goldilocks here come between us. What would yore dad think, if he was alive, and knowed we was lockin' horns over Dave Ganert's niece?"

"What makes yuh think my dad ain't alive?" Matt parried. "And don't think because this girl's Dave Ganert's niece that yuh can do as yuh please. She's goin' to marry me. That's why I'm tellin' yuh again—hands off!"

Joyce, her blue eyes blazing, cried, "That's a—"

"If I was you, Trink," Matt calmly continued, "I'd head for home again. And I wouldn't try doublin' back this time."

"All right, I'll go," the other said, angrily. "But just 'cause you popped the question to her first ain't no sign I'm runnin' out. All's fair in love and war. Remember that!"

As Trink walked away toward his horse which was tied to a near-by tree, Joyce whirled on Matt. But before she could speak what was on her mind, the tall young puncher gently pushed her inside the little cabin and closed the door.

"Oh, so you're taking Mr. Trink's place, are you?" she demanded, grabbing up a stick of wood leaning against the wall. "You liar! Insulting me by saying that I'm going to marry you! You!" Beside herself with rage, she leaped toward him.

Yet, before she could bring down the upraised stick, he caught her arms and said:

"Wait, Joyce. Yuh don't understand. And there ain't time to do much explainin' now. Only I'm askin' yuh, beggin' yuh, to pack up yore duds and come with me. Yuh can't stay here! This place is—"

The door was pushed open from the outside and there stood Dave Ganert.

"What's wrong with this place, Matt?" the intruder asked. "Yuh wouldn't try double-crossin' me, would yuh? Tryin' to take my only niece away from me? Anyhow, yuh don't have to do that. Yuh can spend as much time down here as yuh want. Yo're allus welcome. Yuh know that."

"Is it me that's welcome, or the money I've been losin' over yore poker table?" the younger man retorted.

"That's fer you to guess," Ganert answered testily. "But I'm tellin' yuh this much: Joyce's stayin' here, under my pertection."

"Yeah, yore protection!" Matt echoed. "Where was 'yore protection' when Orville Trink grabbed her hand tonight—and when he sneaked in here a while ago?"

"Well, he wasn't doin' no more sneakin' than you are," Ganert replied. "At least, he didn't have the gall to try sneakin' the girl away from the only home she's got in the world."

"I—I guess you win, Dave," Matt said, after a moment's hesitation. "Well, I'll see yuh tomorrow." Then he turned and strode away, leaving the non-plussed Joyce staring after him.

FOR the next three days the miserable Joyce worked in her uncle's barroom, that smoke-filled, noisy place patronized by transient cowpunchers, prospectors, sheepherders and freighters—and always by Matt Parrish and Orville Trink. The amorous Trink seemed to grow more sullen with each succeeding night. He lost heavily at the poker table, and whenever he would approach the bar, Matt's dark, unwavering eyes were upon him. Joyce was

secretly thankful for Matt Parrish's presence in that room. Though, since that first night, she had treated him with a chill indifference, something in his look told her that he would lay down his life rather than see her harmed.

The girl wondered about this. Was this constant, effective vigilance of his prompted by the fact that he really cared for her, or was it because of some primitive instinct that made him wary when other men tried to shower their unwelcome attentions on her? Several times the young man had tried to talk to her alone; yet the girl's crafty uncle prevented it. He was watching Matt as the latter watched Orville Trink.

One evening as she strolled alone down past the barn, Joyce heard low voices coming from within; the voices of Matt Parrish and her Uncle Dave.

"—and yuh claim yuh like her," the girl overhead Ganert saying. "All right, Matt. Come through with that much cash and I'll see that she marries yuh."

"I'll think it over," Matt answered. "Joyce Dorne's worth all the money in the world, though, and—"

The startled girl didn't wait to hear the rest. Turning away quickly, she nearly bumped into Orville Trink who also was doing some eavesdropping. Without speaking to him, Joyce walked on down toward the creek. Her pulses were pounding as she recalled those words she had overhead. So her uncle was trying to sell her off—and Matt was the interested prospect! There was no doubt in her mind now as to Matt's intentions; nor was there any doubt as to what course she would pursue. No place could possibly be worse for her than Dave Ganert's road ranch. And late tonight, when the gambling and drinking were over, she would quietly pack her things, hide under the tarpaulin cover of a freight wagon, and leave with it in the morning.

What did it matter where that wagon took her? A sob caught at her breath. What did anything matter?

When the girl returned on her way to the house, she saw her uncle talking with Orville Trink. They were quarreling about something. Trink was accusing Ganert of "playin' up to Matt Parrish," and the latter hotly denying it.

ONLY two freighters were stopping at Ganert's place that night. Therefore, Joyce observed, the poker game was five-handed—her uncle, Matt, Trink and the two teamsters. Trink, more sullen than ever, was drinking freely. Ganert was uneasy, and Matt watchful. The girl sensed an undercurrent of tenseness in the room as, from the corner of her eye, she observed Trink's reckless playing. Time after time the latter dug into his pocket for more money while he bawled lustily:

"Another stack!"

When, at last, Trink's roll of currency had been spent, Joyce saw him produce a gold dollar and spin it across the poker table. Yet, before the coin reached Ganert who was banking the game, Matt intercepted it.

"Hey, keep yore paws off'n my money, will yuh?" Trink said.

"Yep." Matt's voice, dangerously calm, came to the listening Joyce. "But this don't happen to be yore money, Trink. Those ain't just scratches on it. If yuh'd looked closer at it, 'fore yuh stole it out of my dad's pocket, yuh'd see those marks make a Double Arrow—our brand."

For an instant it seemed that the staring Trink had frozen in his chair. Then, with a rumbling oath, he leaped to his feet, going for his gun as he did so.

"Look out, Matt!" Joyce shouted as she saw her uncle making a grab for his forty-five.

But the alert Matt needed no warning. Whipping his right hand to the gun on his hip, his left one produced, as if by magic, another forty-five from the top of his boot. Now, telling the

two surprised freighters to stand back, he commanded Trink and Ganert to drop their weapons and stand against the wall.

"What—what's eatin' yuh, Matt?" faltered Joyce's uncle.

"We've been playin' cards for a month now," Matt replied, holding his menacing guns leveled for action. "Well, this is the showdown. Which one of yuh shot my dad? Tell me the story, and make it straight—'cause that's the way I shoot!"

Perhaps it was the threat that Trink saw in his accuser's blazing eyes that caused him to blurt:

"We—we both done it. That day Rawhide Parrish come past here, he was packin' around three thousand dollars on him—"

"Squawk, yuh yellow buzzard!" Ganert yelled. "But it was yore idee. You borrowed fifteen hundred from old Parrish, without tellin' him that little dab of cattle yuh've got was already mortgaged up to their horns!"

"Then what?" Matt clicked.

"Then he—he got scared," Ganert croaked hoarsely, pointing a shaking finger at Trink. "He wanted to git his note back 'fore yore dad found out that them cattle was already mortgaged. He wanted me to help him. Told me I could have that other fifteen hundred dollars Rawhide was packin' if—if—"

"I see," Matt cut in. "Then that's why yuh was so sure my dad had been killed?"

"Yeah!" both men admitted. And Ganert went on, "But we didn't mean to kill him, Matt!"

"Yuh didn't!"

At the sound of that strange voice, Joyce saw Trink and her uncle staring toward the rear doorway. Then Ganert, his sallow face as pale as if he were facing a ghost, yelled:

"Rawhide! Rawhide—Parrish!"

"Yep," said Matt's father, who was also holding a gun on his son's two prisoners. "Kinda surprised, ain't yuh? Well, yuh'd 've been surprised a whole lot sooner if I could've told Matt, when he found me half dead that evenin', who it was that done the shootin'—and robbin'. I kinda thought Ganert was in on it, all right. But I never suspected you, Orville Trink. Not after I'd just got through loanin' yuh fifteen hundred dollars. Well, I'm glad now Matt wanted to wait till he saw that marked gold dollar slidin' across the poker table—even if he did have to spend his nights, and quite a little money, hangin' around Dave Ganert's rotten place!"

As the truth dawned upon her, and while Matt began tying his prisoners' hands, Joyce stole quietly from the loathsome barroom and went to the little cabin where she had been sleeping. As she stepped inside, two tall figures suddenly sprang upon her. A hand was clamped over her mouth, stifling her outcry, while other hands seized her arms.

"Don't fight, miss," said a not unkindly voice. "Take it easy and we will, too. But I might as well tell yuh yo're bein' kidnaped. We've got orders to take yuh away, and that's what we're goin' to do."

Struggling was useless. Joyce found that out. Yet, even that knowledge didn't restrain her from kicking the boot tops of these two stalwart punchers who, at last, picked her up bodily and started carrying her away.

"Hey, Ben! Charley! Hold on there!"

The furious Joyce recognized Matt's voice. Now the latter came running up, as one of the girl's captors said:

"What's wrong, Matt? Didn't yuh tell us to kidnap this girl and take her back to the Double Arrow—and keep here there?"

"Yeah," Matt drawled, chuckling softly as he looked into Joyce's widened eyes. "But that was before I knew there'd be a showdown tonight, Charley. I can handle things from now on, I guess. Besides, Ganert's barroom is closin'—forever. This girl with the gold-colored hair won't have to dish up any more whiskey in that place."

"So—so *you* were having me kidnaped?" Joyce asked.

"Sure," the young man answered as his two punchers, grinning sheepishly, walked away. "But it wasn't altogether my idea. Dad suggested it when I told him about yuh—told him I'd tumbled head over heels in love with yuh and that we'd have to get yuh away from here, one way or another. I tried to explain things to yuh that first night, and a dozen times since, but Ganert was always sneakin' around, watchin' both of us like a hawk."

The fires of fury died in Joyce's eyes as she studied the lean, strong face of this man who was telling her he loved her. A different kind of light came into the girl's eyes then, an illumination akin to that of the tranquil stars shining over the sleeping hills of Casper Basin. No longer was Joyce Dorne an unhappy, homeless waif, harboring conflicting emotions about a certain stalwart son of the range. And she was finding more than refuge here in his arms. She was suddenly finding love; love sealed by this lingering kiss that was pledging her to Matt Parrish.

The Fighting Texan

"*DONDE hay batalla, se halla el Tejano,*" say the Mexicans, meaning, in English, "Where there's a fight, you'll find a Texan." And the history of the Western ranges just about proves them right. Not that the Texan either was or is an habitual trouble-maker, but somehow, like the big old longhorn steers he raised, the average Texan of the range was a fearless fighter. And not only in Texas, either.

It was the Texan, Clay Allison, and his Texas cowboys who stepped off their horses at the end of the long, long cattle trail and shot Bat Masterson's sixgun rule of old Dodge City full of holes. When Joaquin Murietta, the guerilla chief that scourged California in the early days, was finally hunted down to his death, the captain of his hunters was Harry Love, Texan.

It was a Texan, John W. Poe, who came to Pat Garrett, sheriff of Lincoln County, and persuaded him to make one more effort to locate and get Billy the Kid—the "one more effort" ending in the Kid's death at old Ft. Sumner.

Crook, Custer, Miles—practically all the Frontier-tamers of the United States Army preferred Texans for their civilian aides and scouts. The instances are almost numberless, in Texas history, where small groups of Texans have fought and won against tremendous odds, making up for lack of numbers by their fearlessness. The battle of San Jacinto is a notable instance of this.

The Texas Rangers have never been a large organization, but in a huge state they have always made their presence felt. Even as late as the oil boom at Borger, Texas, in 1927, a small detachment of Rangers in one week cleaned out a regular horde of modern gangsters, murderers, stick-ups, and machine-gun racketeers.

Borger had grown from nothing to a town of 35,000 in less than eighteen months, and it was a wild, wild town where no man's purse or life was safe. The police force, made up largely of the new city's new citizens, did its best, but to no avail. Finally Governor Moody sent in a detachment of Rangers. A week later it was all over. Borger had become a law-abiding, peaceful town—except, of course, for the usual lawful turmoil of an oil boom.

Of course, there have been many brave fighters in the West who were not Texans, and doubtless there have also been Texans who were cowards; but for the most part the Mexican, in his fearful, respectful estimate of the Texan, is right: "*Donde hay batalla, se halla el Tejano!*"

Fugitives All

By Herbert A. Woodbury

They had been comrades and pals in adversity. What heaven lay ahead of them, if the skies should clear!

AS he rushed, pell-mell, through the darkness, the rain and the brush, Ames Claiborne heard behind him the deep-throated, blood-curdling baying of the blood-hounds. He heard also the shouts and the crash of footsteps of the prison camp guards. And it dawned upon him that, though for the moment he was free, he had about one chance in a million of making good any real escape.

He plunged on, nevertheless. Better to seize upon that one chance in a million than to be captured and taken back. Better even to be shot down while he ran than to halt and meekly surrender. Life held nothing. Death, consequently, couldn't be much worse.

The night, with its driving rain, was black, pitchy. Racing at top speed, Ames reached the rim of a cliff before he realized that a cliff existed in his path. He took a lunging step forward, found that he'd stepped off into mid-air, and felt himself falling. Down, down, down, and still down! He closed his eyes and tensed his body for the terrific shock of concussion at the bottom. So this was the end!

The past rose up and blurred before his eyes. In that moment of falling, like a man drowning, Ames Claiborne relived his life:

He'd grown up, miles and miles to the north of this southern Border country here where he'd spent the past six months in the State prison road camp. His life had been like the life of any

other rancher's son until he was twelve. Then his father had died, and a neighbor by the name of Seth Clark had taken him in.

Ames saw himself suddenly on an April afternoon three years before. He'd been eighteen, then. Tall, broad-shouldered, deeply tanned, his blond head hatless, he'd been standing beside a buckskin pony, tying a duffle bag onto the rear skirts of the horse's saddle. Seth Clark had stepped up to him, his lean, hatchet face a thundercloud. And Seth had demanded, "Yuh wasn't thinkin' of takin' a trip or anythin', was yuh?"

Ames had turned; he'd looked Seth straight in the eye, and he'd answered him truthfully. "Yuh'd hardly call it a trip, I reckon. I'm jest movin' my things over to the Lazy Y."

There'd been an explosion. Seth had lunged forward, caught him by the shirt collar. "Yo're what?"

"Doin' what I told yuh." He'd jerked free of Seth. "Link Adams, over to the Lazy Y, offered me a job—forty dollars a month. I'm takin' it."

"But yuh ain't got any right—" Seth had commenced.

He'd cut Seth off quietly. He hadn't, he remembered, wanted to argue or have any sort of scene. He'd squared his shoulders, and his glance hadn't wavered in the face of the fury rising in Seth's eyes. He'd said, "Seth, yuh've fed an' clothed me since my dad died, and I'm grateful. Don't think for a minute that I'm not. On the other hand, I've done a man's work for yuh ever since I've been here, without gittin' a cent of wages for it. And I figger that squares us. I'm eighteen now. I'd like to start earnin' some money. I spoke to yuh about wages the other day, and yuh blew up an' said no. So now I'm goin' over to Link's and—"

He'd never finished the sentence. Seth Clark had lifted a blow from his very boot tops, and Ames hadn't been able to dodge. The older man's fist had struck him squarely in the face, and he'd gone reeling back. And then, his whole body awakened to anger at the sudden, sharp, stinging pain of the blow, he'd seen red for the moment, recovered his balance and lunged in.

His own fist had crashed through Seth's guard. He'd struck the man on the point of the chin, and Seth had gone down like a pole-axed steer. Footsteps had sounded. Ben Hardy, Seth's foreman, and two riders had appeared. They, together with Ames, had carried Seth up to the ranch house, given him a drink of brandy and revived him. And then, very quietly, Ames had slipped out of the room, walked back to the corrals, and ridden off.

Three hours later, while he was unpacking his duffle over at Link's place, he'd been arrested for murder. Seth, it seemed, had suffered a sort of relapse, fifteen minutes or so after Ames had left him. He'd gone into a convulsion and the doctor, when he'd arrived, had pronounced him dead.

The night and the darkness continued to rush past him; Ames continued to fall. And the rest of his story passed in pictures before his eyes. He saw himself sitting in the prisoner's dock at the court-house in Tusayan City. He heard the testimony of the State's medical witness, "Blood clot, caused by the blow . . . reached his heart . . . killed him. . . ." He heard the oration of the State's young district attorney, Sam Hays. Hays had just been elected, and he'd been out for glory. He'd twisted the facts. He'd painted Seth Clark to the jury, not as a tyrant who'd expected the poor orphan in his care to work for nothing, but as a generous, warm-hearted philanthropist who'd taken in a starving child and been good to him. He'd damned Ames as an ingrate, a rattlesnake, a cold-blooded killer. And he'd asked the jury to hang him.

Down, down, and still down! Well . . . the jury hadn't hanged him. They'd considered his youth and recommended mercy. Mercy had been meted out to him in the form of a sentence of life imprisonment. And that was the end of the story. Except that he'd served three years of that sentence. And except

that he didn't care now, as the wind swished past him, whether he died when he struck the canyon floor or not.

Down and still down! And then the bottom at last! Only there was no shock of concussion. There was simply a tremendous splash. It dawned upon Ames abruptly that the rain of all day today had filled whatever stream flowed in this little canyon to flood level. Water swallowed him up. He came to the surface, choking, spitting, gasping, but alive!

INSTANTLY the shouts of the prison guards and the deep baying of the bloodhounds on the heights above him died away. The swift current of the flood caught him, hurled him downstream like lightning.

Ames let himself ride with the crest of the flood. He paddled to keep afloat; he dodged the floating logs, the driftwood and the débris; and he let the force of the torrent hurl him farther and farther below his pursuers. The creek swept him round a turn in its narrow gorge; round another turn. Then the rain stopped for an instant. The moon peeped through the clouds overhead, and Ames saw that the high walls of the gorge were growing lower, sloping. He ceased his drifting, battled with the current in the channel, and struck out for the shore opposite the one from which he'd fallen.

Ten minutes later, weary and exhausted, cold and numb, he reached a point near the bank where he could stand up and wade. He halted, listened for the dogs and the guards. But the freshet had carried him miles, and had carried him far more swiftly than his pursuers could travel. He heard no sound except the wind and the rush of water. He waded on in toward the shore, came out on a narrow, rocky beach, and plunged into a willow thicket beyond.

A little way off, the other side of the willow thicket, a yellow light in a cabin window beckoned him. Ames headed for it. He approached a tiny, tar-paper shack and a low, dilapidated barn. The house, with its light in the window—a sign of habitation—he skirted on a wide arc. He stole toward the barn from the rear, and his heart leaped as he heard the stomp of horses inside. He was in luck! Mexico lay only thirty some miles to the south. He had by now a real head start on the posse from the prison camp. Give him a pony, into the bargain, and—"

He let the thought trail off in action. He opened the barn door, moved it all the way back so that it wouldn't flap and bang in the wind. Then he walked into the stable's inky interior and began groping, fumbling his way.

What came next was like a thunderclap. Out of the pitchy blackness there leaped abruptly the bright beam of an electric torch. The shaft of a flash-light caught Ames in the eyes, blinded him. And a girl's voice, low and steady, said, "Hands up, stranger!"

Ames came to a still, frozen halt. Then the voice of the girl came again, "Turn around, now, and walk out of here." Ames obeyed; he turned, marched back to the barn door and outside into the mud again. All the time his mind raced with a thousand questions. Had the news of his escape been broadcast so soon? Had this little cabin out here in the wilderness been reached by phone? And had its inhabitants been instructed to be on the lookout for him? Or did the girl simply take him for a tramp, a prowler?

He turned back to face the girl as she came out of the barn after him. She'd put out her flash, but he couldn't yet see her very well. He said, "I didn't mean no harm, ma'am. I was just lookin' for a place to sleep, out of the wet, for the night." Her flash had been only on his face. He prayed and hoped that she hadn't seen too much of his costume. Or that if she had seen it, she hadn't recognized his khaki trousers and his loose khaki jacket for what they were. He went on, apologetically, "I should have gone up to the cabin an' knocked, an' got yore permission, first, I reckon, but—"

The girl's voice was a little cry. "Then—then you haven't been up to the cabin yet? You haven't seen—" She cut herself off, and her sentence remained there, suspended in mid-air.

"Nope, ma'am," Ames said, "I ain't seen yore dad or yore husband or whoever I'd ought to of seen." He took a step casually toward her as he spoke. His eyes, momentarily blinded had recovered from the effects of her torch. He could see her now, in general, hazy outline. She had bobbed hair, and she was wearing cowboots and a divided riding skirt. He couldn't make out her face or her features. But he saw the gun in her right hand.

"What about it?" he asked her. "Would it be possible for me to spend the rest o' the night in there in the hay?" And then as he spoke, he sprang. He caught her off guard as he'd hoped he would. He seized her hand, flung it upward, and wrenched the gun out of her fingers.

His voice changed instantly. There was a command in it now as he said bruskly, "Quiet, now, and don't scream for help. I ain't goin' to hurt yuh, and I don't want to hurt anybody else either. But I'm givin' yuh fair warnin'. I've jest escaped from the prison camp on up the creek; I'm desperate an' I'll shoot it out with anybody that tries to stop me. Now go back in the barn there with yore flash, an' saddle me a pony."

The girl didn't budge. She stood there a second; then she commenced to laugh. Only it wasn't pleasant laughter, soft and silvery. It was thin, brittle, nervously hysterical.

Ames cried, "Shut up, yuh little idiot. I told yuh that if yuh roused anybody up at the house, and if they come down here, I'd—"

The girl pulled herself together instantly. Ames saw a little tremor pass through her as she squared her shoulders, lifted her head erect. And when she spoke, her voice was calm. "You needn't worry," she said, "about anybody coming down from the house. I just laughed because I couldn't help it all of a sudden. You see—I thought, a minute ago when you came into the barn here, that you were somebody after me. And instead, you're somebody in the same boat with me."

Ames gasped. "Somebody in the—"

She repeated, "In the same boat with me. I—I'm running away, too. I was down here, stealing horses, myself."

Ames swallowed. The gun in his hand faltered. And then instantly he brought it up again. "What is this?" he demanded. "What sort of a line are yuh tryin' to pull? Stealin' my thunder, are yuh? Hope to git me talkin' and off my guard, and then git yore gun back?"

She shook her head. "You said you hadn't been up to the cabin. Suppose you come up there with me now."

She moved past Ames as she spoke and started up the path toward the lighted shack. After a second, slowly and bewilderedly, Ames followed her. They mounted the cabin steps together. She pushed open the unlocked door. And if Ames had held a nervous finger on the trigger of the gun, fearing that she was leading him into some trap, that finger relaxed. For a tableau met his eyes which made him halt stock still on the threshold.

An oil lamp hung by a chain from the ceiling of the little room. The rest of the room looked as if a cyclone had struck it. Tables and chairs had been overturned, smashed to kindling wood. In the center of the devastation and the débris, his blue shirt front stained crimson, a wound the size of a silver dollar in his breast, lay a young man. A young man who looked so ugly and villainous in death that Ames felt not the slightest pang of sympathy for him.

Rather, his sympathy suddenly flowed out toward the girl. He turned and looked at her. And he really saw her for the first time. She stood there on the cabin stoop beside him, bathed in the light flooding out of the wrecked room. Her bobbed hair was the color of yellow gold. Her face was white, strained. She had soft violet eyes.

Ames broke the gun which, a moment

before, he'd taken from her. The faint odor of burned powder assailed his nostrils. Out of one chamber slipped an empty cartridge. Ames swallowed, gulped. "Y-yuh killed him?" he stammered.

She didn't answer him, and he repeated it. "You killed him?" He took a tremulous little step toward her, and in a moment he had her in his arms. And it was as natural and as simple as all that. Three years in prison had made him hard and bitter and desperate. But the hardness and the harshness all of a sudden flowed out of him. He felt himself aroused to a pitch of deep, genuine emotion which he hadn't felt in years. There was the man on the floor —a thug, obviously—dead. Here was this girl with her soft golden hair. And she'd killed him. Well, she'd been justified! He hadn't heard her story yet, but he knew that she'd been in the right! He knew that he wanted to protect her!

Suddenly he said huskily, "Come on, then, kid. We'll have to hurry. They're after me with bloodhounds, yuh see. I've thrown 'em off the trail for a little while. But it won't be long before they cross the creek and pick up my trail again where I come ashore. That means they'll come here. They'll find the dead man. And if you ain't out of the neighborhood—"

He drew the cabin door to, closed it on the grim, grizzly scene inside, took the girl by the hand and started back down toward the barn. She said softly, "I thought maybe you'd help me. That's why I brought you up here to—to show you."

She went on, "I was down in the barn trying to harness a buckboard when I heard you approaching the place here. I thought at first that you were some friend of Dick's, coming to call on him. I expected you to look in at the house, see Dick there dead, and then rush off for the sheriff. But instead you came down to the barn. And I didn't know you hadn't been up to the cabin, first. I thought maybe you'd seen my flashlight before I put it out, and were coming down there to investigate, and—"

She broke off. "But we can talk later. The important thing now is that you will help me, won't you?" She added, "And it won't all be one-sided, because I'll be helping you, too. I don't imagine you know the neighborhood here. I do. I can take us through country where we won't be seen. And I know a little back trail into Mexico that isn't ever patroled."

They reached the barn again as she spoke. She turned on her flash as they entered the door, and Ames saw, on up the center aisle, two ponies half harnessed to a buckboard. The girl said, "I'll hold the light. You finish harnessing the team."

Ames scowled. "But why take a buckboard, kid?" he asked her. "We'd go farther an' faster in the saddle. If it came to a pinch, we wouldn't have to stick to the trails, either."

"I know," she said, "but we've got to take a buckboard, just the same. On account of my father."

Ames gasped, "Yore father?"

"He's lying back there in the hay. I managed to get him down here from the house. But he's in a sort of stupor, half conscious, half unconscious. Can't coordinate. And I'm afraid he couldn't ride a saddle pony."

She added, while Ames stood there trying to fit the presence of a third person into the tableau, "But of course if you think a buckboard would be too slow for you, you could take a saddle pony and go on alone. I mean—after all, if you'll just help me get Dad into the buckboard—I can't lift him—why then, maybe I won't need you any more."

He felt the same surge of deep, masculine protectiveness flow over him which had flowed over him a second before. He said briskly, "Nonsense. We're all in this thing together, now. And if it's got to be a buckboard for you, a buckboard it is for me." He stepped forward, picked up one of the dangling harness straps and set to work. And then he asked her, "But what's yore

father doin' here? And how come he's in this stupor? And—"

He broke off abruptly. "Listen, kid," he said, "you didn't kill that man up there, after all, did yuh?"

She hesitated a second. Then she said, "What difference does it make whether I killed him or not?"

"It don't make any difference," Ames told her, "because I'm for yuh, either way—whether it was you, and yo're runnin' away on yore own account, or whether it was yore dad, and yo're simply tryin' to git him out of the country. Nope, it don't make any difference. But that was the way it was, wasn't it? Yore dad killed him. A girl and a man fightin' couldn't have wrecked that room that way. It must have been two men. And that'd account for yore dad's bein' in a stupor, too. He got knocked slug-nutty, as they say, in a fight."

He broke off and waited on pins and needles. He'd told her a second ago that it made no difference whether she'd killed the man up at the cabin or not. And in some ways it did make no difference. He'd have been, as he said, for her in any case. But on the other hand, it did make a difference, too. He knew from his own experience what it was to have murder on your heart. And he prayed suddenly with all his might that the girl, for her own sake, might be innocent. She was so sweet, so young, so lovely.

She answered him at last. "All right then. Dad killed him, I didn't." She added, "But Dad was justified, I know." Her voice mounted, "Dick must have started the fight. And if Dad shot him, it must have been in self-defense."

He said, "Sure, that was the way it was." His fingers meantime worked nimbly, deftly on the harness. He buckled the last buckle and stood back. "Yuh didn't see the murder, then?" He bit his tongue. He wished he hadn't said murder. He wished he'd said shooting. But he'd spoken without thinking. Murder it had been, and murder he'd called it. His eyes hadn't failed to notice, up there at the cabin, that the dead man had been unarmed.

She said, "No, I didn't see it. I got there afterward."

Then she shot her flash, which she'd been holding upon the team during the harnessing, into one of the stalls. Its beam picked up a man somewhere in his forties who lay there quiet, still. Ames saw a face which favored the girl's. A little more rugged, perhaps; handsome where hers was pretty.

He stepped forward, lifted the man up into his arms. As he did so, the man moaned, "Shot him . . . got him, by dang. . . ." Ames carried his burden back to the buckboard.

"We'll put him down in back, huh?" he asked.

The girl nodded. "On a blanket or something. I'll go up to the cabin and get a blanket" She vanished and was back in a moment with a quilt and a pillow. They wrapped her father up, laid him tenderly in the rear of the buckboard.

THEN Ames drove the team out the barn doors, and they were off. The girl sat in back with her father. Now and then she called directions to Ames. "The left fork when we get up there in the cottonwoods . . . now the right fork. . . ." They didn't talk much.

Ames whipped his team into a trot. Thirty miles or so lay ahead of them. More, maybe, because of the circuitous route they were taking. Better not to exhaust the ponies by loping them yet. He looked back occasionally; listened. He heard no sounds of pursuit.

The girl climbed finally into the front seat. "Dad's asleep, now," she said. "I'll just let him rest. I—I wanted to tell you how it happened, so you'll understand—" The moon had come out again now, and she flashed him a little smile.

She commenced her story at the beginning. Her name was Beth Paige, she said. Her father owned a small ranch about five miles to the west of the little cabin where the dead man lay. And the

dead man, Dick Heffner, had been their neighbor.

"Dick came to Dad about a year and a half ago," she said, "and wanted to borrow some money. That was before Dick had taken to drinking so much, before he looked so dissipated, and Dad rather liked him. He lent him a thousand dollars on a note that was to run for six months.

"Well, just before the six months was up, the bank in town failed, and Dick claimed that on account of the bank failure he couldn't pay Dad back. He had all his funds tied up. Dad's a kind-hearted man, and he was more than willing to be reasonable. He could have sued Dick and gotten a judgment against his land or his cattle, but he didn't."

Beth went on, "A year went by and the bank in town didn't open up, and things remained just where they were. Dad began to need the money he'd lent Dick; began to need it terribly, but he didn't press Dick.

"And then, a couple of days ago, Dad happened to find out that Dick had lied to him when he'd said his funds were tied up in the closed bank. They weren't, and never had been. Dick had drawn all his money—about four thousand dollars—out of the bank the week before it had gone under. And he'd had the cash to pay Dad, all this time, hidden in his cabin.

"Under the circumstances, Dad blew up, as you can imagine. He ran into Dick in town that very same day, and demanded his money. Dick refused to give it to him; said he'd spent it all by that time. Then Dad threatened to sue Dick, and Dick laughed in his face. Told Dad he'd transferred the title to his ranch and his cattle into his brother's name, and that Dad could go whistle for his money.

"They had a fight there in town, and Dick—he's young and husky, and Dad's beginning to get on a little—Dick beat Dad up. Dad spent the next two days in bed, at home. And then tonight—I'd been in town all day and I didn't get home till late—I found Dad had left his bed, taken his gun, which he doesn't usually carry, and gone out some place. I guessed where it was, at once—up to Dick's cabin. I saddled a horse and started after him, but I got there too late. Dick was dead. And Dad was—was the way you found him when you picked him up out of the hay a minute ago. Just lying sort of half unconscious, moaning, 'Shot him . . . got him, by damn. . . .'"

She added hastily, "B-but I'm sure Dad didn't just shoot him in cold blood, even if there wasn't any gun on Dick. They had a fist fight, first, and—well, I know what the law is. Dad wasn't entitled to use a gun unless Dick had pulled one. But if Dick, maybe, had him down, and was beating him mercilessly, don't you think—"

Her voice trailed off. She looked up appealingly at Ames. Ames reached over, took her soft little hand, and squeezed it. "Sure," he told her, "the law'd hold yore dad for murder. But under the circumstances, it was hardly murder."

He looked back, suddenly, into his own past. His crime had been murder, too. But it, also, hadn't been intended to be murder. He felt the need, all of a sudden, of telling Beth about himself. She'd wanted his sympathy and understanding. He wanted hers. That was peculiar in a way, because he wasn't the sort of man who generally cared for sympathy. He'd never discussed his crime with his fellow prisoners in the penitentiary. He'd held himself rigorously aloof. But he felt now, for no reason that he could clearly define, that he had to explain himself to Beth.

They continued on, their ponies' hoofs beating out a sharp tattoo as they pulled up out of the flats into the rimrock of the hills, and he told her his story.

"And they gave you life for that?" she asked him. "Why, you weren't even as guilty as—as my father."

She lapsed abruptly into silence. He saw her tremble, and he wished that he

hadn't told her after all, because he could see her commencing to worry. If they'd given him life for a murder which had been an unfortunate accident, what, then, would they give her father?

He took her hand again. "But it's all goin' to be all right," he said. "The prison camp posse evidently didn't pick up my trail, after all. We ain't bein' pursued. And if the camp posse don't find Dick's body, it may be days before anybody else finds it. We're only a little ways from Mexico now, and—"

The buckboard swept round a turn into a barricade of brush! Ames' voice of reassurance trailed off at the bark of a command: "Hands up, folks!" And there in the faint moonlight, Ames saw, gleaming through the brush, the barrels of a half-dozen shotguns!

He had the gun which he'd taken from Beth in his hand. He could have jerked it up and commenced shooting; tried to run the barricade. But to have done so would have been to invite a volley which would have endangered the girl along with himself. Ames let the gun slide out of his fingers into his lap. And for the second his mind spun. The prison camp posse awaiting him here?

Then he saw in a flash that the men behind the barricade hadn't come from the prison camp. Three of them stepped forward. They were ranchers and punchers in Stetsons and chaps. One of them advanced toward the buckboard. He spoke to Beth, not to Ames: "Got yore father in back there, have yuh?"

Beth stammered, "And wh-what do you want of my father?"

"Easy," said the rancher. "The sheriff happened to drop in at Dick Heffner's cabin about an hour ago. He found Dick dead, found yore father's wallet lyin' on the floor. Two an' two make four in any man's language. He set out followin' fresh buckboard tracks, discovered yuh was takin' the old telephone trail for Mexico, and he phoned on ahead from Gibson's ranch. I got the message, organized a reception committee for yuh, and here we are."

There was a long moment of silence while the man glared very hard at Beth. He still hadn't looked at Ames. He wasn't evidently interested in Ames. He'd heard from the sheriff that Dick Heffner had been found murdered. But he hadn't heard from the prison camp that an escaped convict was at large.

The little moment of silence spun itself out. Ames cleared his throat. "Jest a minute, pard," he said. "Yuh've got all this wrong. Take a look at me—these khaki pants, these hob-nailed shoes, this khaki jumper. Ever see a uniform like that before?"

The man's glance darted to Ames. "Well, I'll be danged," he cried.

"Check," Ames said. "And now I'll tell yuh what really happened to Heffner. I escaped from the prison camp—see? I fell into some danged creek, and it washed me downstream to this bird Heffner's cabin. I swam ashore, saw a light in a cabin window, and busted in on the place. There was three people in the room—Heffner, the girl here and her father."

He took a long, deep breath. He mustn't bawl this up. He'd have to account for the shooting having been done with old man Paige's gun. He went on, "The old man that's in back here, lunged at me. I hit him, knocked him out. Then Heffner jumped me. I grabbed the old man's gun and shot Heffner. Then, figgerin' it wasn't safe to leave the old man and the girl there to spread the alarm, I forced 'em to come with me.

"Yuh savvy all that? Ames Claiborne's the name. I was sent up from Tusayan County for murder. So when I escaped, I was desperate. I had everythin' to gain and nothin' to lose. I crashed the cabin there with the idea of takin' everybody by surprise, holdin' 'em up, stealin' their money, a gun, maybe, and a horse. Only, they put up a fight, I had to kill Heffner, and—"

A voice beside him cried, "It wasn't that way. He's lying to save me. *I* killed Dick Heffner."

"You?" cried the rancher from the posse.

"I killed him," Beth repeated. "I rode

up there wearing Dad's gun and cartridge belt. Dad had gone ahead of me. I wanted to overtake him and bring him back. When I got there, Dad and Dick were fighting. Dick had Dad down and —and was beating him with a chair leg. I pulled Dad's gun out of my holster, and—and I shot him!"

"She didn't!" Ames shouted. "Sheriff—deputy, whoever yuh are, yuh've got to believe me! *I* killed him, and—"

"Then why does she take the blame?"

"Because I used to know her," Ames cried. "I—I visited in this country before I was convicted of murder. We went together. We were in love. And she's been nit-wit enough to keep on lovin' me in spite of everythin'. I killed Dick Heffner, I tell yuh. And—"

The man from the posse cut him off. "It's too danged complicated for me," he said. "Supposin' yuh both tell yore stories to the sheriff, back in town." He moved forward as he spoke, and climbed up into the front seat of the buckboard beside Ames. He took the reins. Two other members of the posse got into the rear of the buckboard.

And in a moment the vehicle was doubling back on its tracks. Ames whispered into Beth's ear, "Yuh danged idiot. What made yuh do that?"

She said, "If they gave you life before, they'll hang you, after a story like that."

"And what if they did?" he asked her. "What's left in life for me? I'd planned all along to go down fightin' if they captured me, cornered me. This is the same danged thing, don't yuh see it? Now when we get to the sheriff's office, you let me talk. Promise me!"

She didn't promise him. She said, "Shush, the guards'll overhear you." And they jogged on and on in silence. Hours passed, it seemed to Ames. Eternities. The sky grew pink in the east.

IT was dawn when they reached the sheriff's office in town, when the posse unloaded them and turned them over to the law. Ames saw a tall, broad-shouldered man wearing a star step forward to greet them. Only, he didn't look pleased and satisfied. He looked flustered, somehow, and embarrassed. He said, "Um . . . er, Joe, I been tryin' to git yuh on the phone. We . . . um . . . er . . . it looks like we'd made a sort of serious mistake. Old man Paige didn't shoot Heffner, after all."

"I know he didn't," the deputy said, "I've got the man right here that shot him. Or the gal."

"Yuh've got *what?*" gasped the sheriff.

"Well," said the deputy, "they each say they done it, and—"

The sheriff gulped. "Well, this is most embarrassin'," he said, "most danged embarrassin'. Because they've got a bird up at the hospital that's confessed to the shootin', too. Bird by the name of Ben Hardy."

The name leaped out at Ames from the past. "Ben Hardy!" he cried.

"Ben Hardy," said the sheriff. "He'd heard the other day that Dick Heffner had a lot of money hidden in cash in his cabin. He went out there tonight to hold Dick up. He found Paige there, too. He lined 'em up, took their wallets. Then, accordin' to his story, jest as he was backin' away, both men jumped him, Paige pullin' a gun. He let Paige have it; thought he'd killed him. Him an' Heffner clinched an' fell to the floor. They knocked the place to pieces. Then he got his gunhand free and shot Heffner. He started to the door, and as he did so, Paige raised up on one elbow, and fired. His bullet at Paige, evidently, had simply glanced across the top of the man's skull, knockin' him groggy. Anyway, Paige come to long enough to shoot Hardy, and he staggered outa the cabin wounded. . . ."

Ames cried, "And that's what yore dad meant, Beth, when he kept moanin', 'Shot him . . . got him, by dang. . . .' He meant he'd got Hardy, not Heffner!"

The sheriff resumed, "Hardy staggered out of the cabin wounded, as I say. He jumped on his horse, beat it for

town, and passed out jest as he reached the corner of Main and Pearl. They took him to the hospital here in town, at jest about the same time I happened to be out in the hills makin' my own little call on Heffner. And while I was sendin' a posse out on a wild-goose chase after Paige, Hardy was dyin' in here, and confessin' to murder. . . ."

Ames looked at Beth. "And that lets you an' yore dad out of it!"

Her hand closed over his, and she shot him a glance of sheer anguish. "But it doesn't let you out of it. They'll take you back." He saw the tears start in her eyes. "You should have gone on alone by saddle pony," she said. "You shouldn't have stayed with us."

The sheriff's voice, meantime, continued, ". . . confessin' to murder. Confessin' to two murders, as a matter of fact. Danged curious thing, incidentally. Just got the word that a man by the name of Ames Claiborne escaped from the prison camp, last night. Well, it seems this man Hardy not only killed Heffner, but he killed the man Claiborne was accused of killin'."

Ames felt the room reel and sway. Sheer dizziness swept over him. And the sheriff's next words came to him in a blur. "Hardy's always been a thief, apparently, and this man Clark he once worked for had a lot of money hid away in coffee cans. Hardy was plannin' on takin' it and high-tailin' all along. But the way things happened, opportunity played into his hands. This kid Claiborne had a fight with Clark, knocked him out. Hardy took charge of revivin' him. And when Claiborne had left the house, Hardy hit Clark over the head and killed him. He blamed it on Claiborne. Then he stole the money hid in the cans, and a week or two later he drifted. So, now, if Claiborne had only stayed in prison another day—"

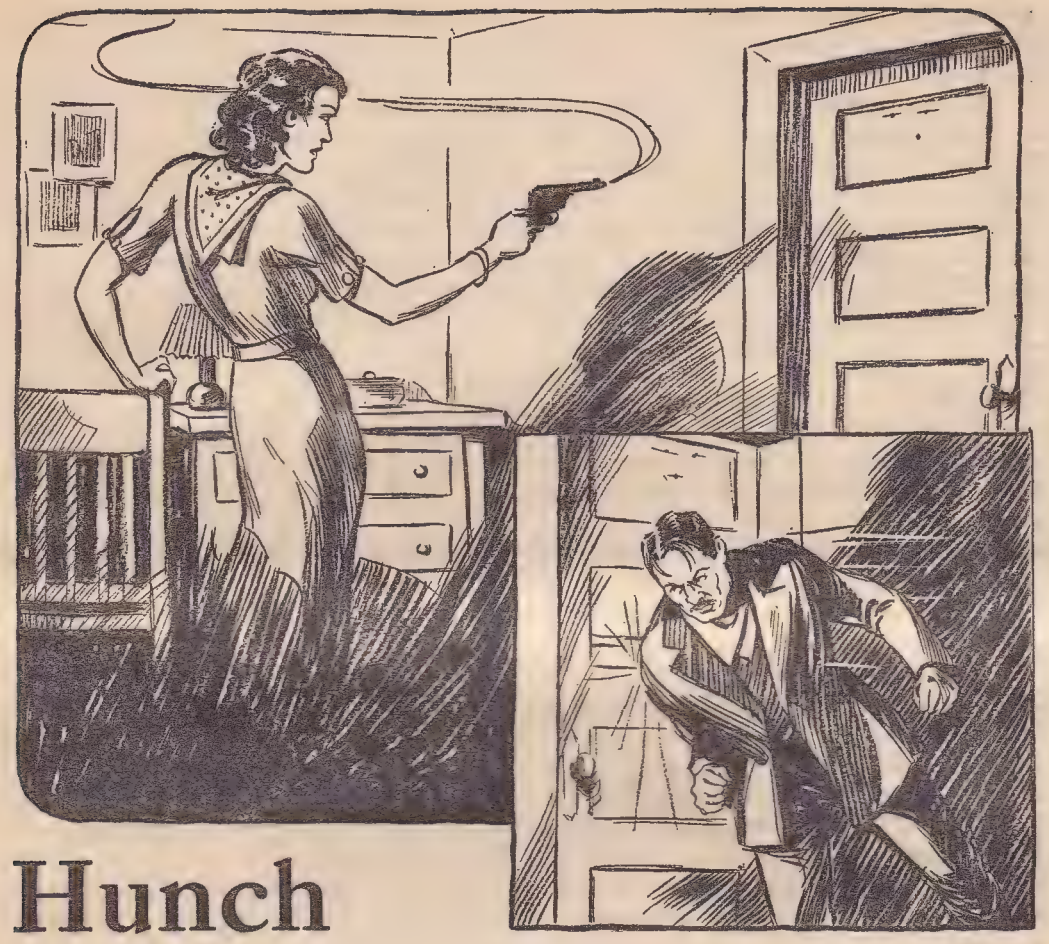
Ames heard Beth cry, "You mean they can do something to Claiborne, now, for escaping, even though he was innocent of the crime he went to prison for?"

The sheriff shook his head. "No, I don't mean that. I jest mean that Claiborne's prob'ly in Mexico now, wanderin' the hills like a fugitive. It may be months before he hears of his good fortune. I'm sorry for him, that's all." The sheriff broke off. His eyes for the first time seemed to alight on Ames. He seemed for the first time to see Ames' costume. He cried, "My God, you ain't by any chance this bird, Claiborne, are yuh?"

Ames didn't answer him. He couldn't. A young girl with soft, golden hair and violet eyes had thrown her arms about him. And for some strange reason she was sobbing. Ames gathered her into his own arms. He kissed her on the wet, tear-stained cheeks, on the eyes, on the mouth. He stammered, "B-but what's the matter, darlin'?"

She looked up at him. She said, "Nothing's the matter. I just feel like crying."

He couldn't figure it out for the second. Then it dawned upon him that he felt rather emotional himself. He didn't cry, however. He simply gathered her the tighter into his arms, and went on kissing her. They'd been pals and comrades in adversity. What heaven lay ahead of them, now that the skies had cleared!



Hunch Play

By James W. Routh

Something was awry in the Buckthorn, something which made itself known by an eerie tension in the air that was not lost on Bob Dean. And for the sake of a girl of courage he set himself to make right what was wrong.

I

Travel Postponed

ON the top rail of the loading pen, south of the depot at Mesa City, two cowboys puffed brown paper cigarettes. Overhead the sky was a-glitter with stars, while far away to the east, across the rolling expanse of the valley, the jagged backbone of the Buckthorns was thrust against the pale disk of the rising moon. The jumbled noises of the cowtown blended harmoniously with the mournful whistle of an approaching train.

"She's close to on time," observed Bob Dean idly. "Yuh know, Dusty, the toot of a train whistle does somethin' to me. Did yuh ever think—"

"When did you?" cut in the waspish Fenton tartly.

"If I hadn't worked overtime at it," Dean drawled, "there's one shriveled up, wind-broke maverick that would be in plumb deplorable condition right about now."

"Huh!" grunted Dusty. "Seems I managed to survive a few years without

yore help. But I know what ails yuh. Yo're yearnin' to see what's over the hill. After three years—"

"Shore!" Dean stretched a long leg to the ground. "Why not? There's a heap of this man's world I ain't seen yet."

Again the whistle of the train wailed like a banshee. Bob Dean lifted his arms, breathed deeply, his face toward the stars. Dusty Fenton chucked his cigarette into the dust, muttered bad words softly.

"If yuh go," he said, "yuh go alone."

The tall partner did not seem to hear. "We could send back for our warbags," he murmured dreamily. "Number Three stops at Junction. They say it's a pretty country in the mountains back of Twin Peaks. Yeah, I reckon I'll take a pasear. Three years without a change of scenery is too long."

From the darkness at the end of the loading pen came the rasp of a voice like a file biting steel. "For once I'm in agreement with yuh, Dean. Better make yore goin' permanent."

Fenton whipped about like a cat, his hands dropping to the handles of his guns. A bulky shape moved out of the shadows; a man so broad that his length seemed shrunken, although he towered a full two inches above Bob Dean's six feet. This was Monk Vasco, gunman boss of the Flying V horse outfit. The reputation of the man discouraged prying beneath the surface of his business, but Dean and his waspish partner had long been convinced that enterprises more profitable than breeding horses engaged Vasco and his salty crew.

"Unfinished business might detain me, Monk," drawled Dean softly. "Yore endorsement is discouragin', too, come to think of it."

"Yuh've overstayed yore time here," Vasco retorted grimly. "Better travel upright than in a box."

The tall cowboy stiffened, seemed at the point of speech, hesitated. Another mournful whistle from the train, and the song of the rails, growing louder, seemed to lay a spell upon him. His hand dropped from Fenton's shoulder, his head lifted.

"Reckon I'll surprise yuh an' go. Monk, yore end is charted an' laid out for yuh. Yuh'll come to it without my aid. I'll go—but that's not to say I won't come back!"

"If yuh feel so," muttered Vasco, "fill yore hand an' settle yore destination. I'd as leave see yuh on yore way to hell as elsewhere."

Dean quivered, tensed. Dusty Fenton sidestepped swiftly. Monk Vasco crouched. But the will to kill was not in the tall cowboy that night. He tensed, but he relaxed, and his denial was slow and calm.

"No! Yuh'll have no chance to try yore luck tonight, Monk. There's times when a man won't turn aside even to kill a sidewinder. Come on, Dusty—she's rollin' in."

Deliberately he turned, moved toward the train. Fenton, less trustful of Vasco's ethics, followed reluctantly with a ready eye upon the giant and a hand prepared to flip forth a gun. But Vasco, with a muttered oath, wheeled and lurched away.

"Loco!" snapped Dusty. "Yuh should have gunned the polecat, an' never turned yore back on him! If yuh begin this way, where will yuh end? Damnation, I reckon I've got to trail along to keep the coyotes back."

The tall partner chuckled and hurried along the plank platform. "I knew yuh'd come. As for gunnin' ol' Monk—well, I never could kill in cold blood. An' tonight I'm overflowin' with peace an' good will."

"This ain't Christmas, it's July, yuh half-wit!" growled the little puncher savagely.

But he broke into a run to keep pace. Mesa City did not rate more than a brief pause in the express-passenger flyer's dash across the continent. As the men passed the baggage car a trunk came out and thumped onto the depot truck, which already held a mail sack and a couple of boxes. The conductor, farther down the platform, pocketed his

orders and signaled the engineer. The partners quickened their pace.

The night of payday had brought a number of cowboys to join the regular onlookers at the depot. Dean pushed through a knot of them, replied to their salutations, hurried on. He had his eye on an open Pullman when he brushed past a trimly clad young woman, who apparently had descended from it. Traveling at full speed, intent only upon getting aboard the already moving train, he caught but a brief glimpse of her face. He saw, without seeing, big dark eyes, a short, stubborn nose, soft red lips, the curve of a rounded cheek, the tilt of a small, proud head. So intent was he upon his purpose that recognition lagged. It was not until he had followed Fenton onto the moving train that he attached a name to the girl.

"My gosh!" he gasped then, gripping his partner's arm. "Did yuh see her?"

"Leggo me, yuh pinch-bug!" growled Dusty. "See who? It gets worse an' worse, by gosh! Now it's a her. I tell yuh—"

"Get on!"

A strong arm propelled him, sputtering, down the aisle of the swaying Pullman. On they went through the next car and the next, and into the observation car at the end of the train. Here a brakeman blocked their progress. Dean swept him aside, shoved Fenton toward the rail.

"Hop! We're goin' back!"

The brakeman gathered himself, launched forward with a yell, no doubt suspecting banditry. Dean shoved his hand into the man's face, back-heeled him, swung over the rail where Dusty had vanished.

The train was picking up speed down a slight grade. Brush slapped at the tall cowboy's long legs; the earth whizzed darkly beneath him. His right foot struck solidly, his left came down yards later. He took half a dozen tremendous strides, hit a sage bush and came up spitting sand. The small red lights at the end of the train winked back derisively. The brakeman's voice, full of emotion, was smothered by distance. Near at hand Dusty Fenton expressed himself eloquently.

"Dry up," said Dean, grinning. "Yo're wastin' too much steam. Anyhow, what are yuh ravin' about? Yuh wanted to stay here, an' we're stayin'. Travel is postponed!"

"Yuh'll be postponed, yuh dragged-out brother of a mountain canary, if yuh ever pull another trick like this un! Damnation, I lit in prickly pear! Now laugh, yuh idjut!"

But Bob Dean did not laugh. He spoke so soberly that Fenton forgot to cuss.

"I seem to've lost my sense of humor. What's brought Ellen Mercer back to this country? It's shore a puzzlin' question, when yuh consider the recent habits of Duke Burdick! Only this evenin' I saw him talkin' private with Vasco. That's bad enough for a man who brags he'll own or be managin' partner of the T Bar M when the estate is settled. If it turns out he's been lyin'—"

"It wouldn't be news," grunted Dusty. "Yo're shore an aggravatin' cuss. I never knowed Thad Mercer had a daughter."

"He seldom mentioned it," Dean explained. "His wife, after Ellen got to be school age, roped herself a flock of ideas that didn't fit in with life on a cow ranch. Her an' Ellen have lived East for some years. When Thad was gunned, I figgered she'd rid herself of the ranch *pronto,* which gave weight to Burdick's braggin'."

Dusty began to understand a number of things. "He's been talkin' free, that's a fact. But Thad was killed close to four months ago. An' I didn't notice but one woman, tall feller. How come yuh recognized her so quick?"

"Ellen was alone," Dean acknowledged thoughtfully. "An' why shouldn't I know her? She was at the T Bar M three summers ago. We got to be right friendly. There's more of Thad in her than there is of her mother. She—well, she's folks. . . . Likewise," he added

softly, "Thad was a mighty good friend of mine!"

II

Dean Plays a Hunch

THE train had carried the two cowboys well beyond such lights as Mesa City afforded. Looking toward the depot, Dean concluded that no one seemed to have noticed their dropping off. This gave him an idea.

"Dusty, seven times out of ten a hunch ain't worth a hoot, but the other three times is apt to be important. Right now I've got a powerful hunch that we've an ace in the hole as long as certain parties figgers we're travelin' west in style."

Fenton sighed. "When brains ain't needed, you get along fine."

The tall partner went on quietly. "We'll split. You smuggle our broncs out to the old adobe on the north trail. I'll see if I can get a word in private with Ellen. It might help to know her plans."

They parted forthwith. It was not difficult to slip into town unobserved. In due course the tall partner made his way to the rear of the hotel, a rambling, two-story frame building which stood somewhat removed from the dance hall and the center of the night's activities. Feeling his way along a dark passage between it and the adjacent store building, he moved cautiously toward the front.

Presently his ears assured him that he'd guessed correctly. He heard Ellen Mercer speaking, knew that she was on the wide veranda that fronted the hotel building.

"Of course I might have written, or wired," she was saying. "But it didn't seem necessary. If I hadn't run into you here, Mr. Burdick, I should have hired a livery rig to drive to the ranch. By all means go right ahead with your business."

Bob Dean leaned his wide shoulders against the sun-blistered side of the hotel. He had no scruples against listening in on this conversation between Thad Mercer's daughter and Burdick, who had been Mercer's foreman and had remained at the T Bar M as manager after the owner's death. Duke Burdick's secret intimacy with Monk Vasco gave him, he thought, ample justification.

"Yuh'd be more comfortable in town," Burdick argued. "We wasn't expectin' yuh, an' ain't fixed up for a lady. I can get yuh a nice room here at the hotel."

"You can get me a rig," said the girl.

"In the mornin'," the man continued stubbornly, "we can talk things over. Mebbe it won't be necessary for yuh to go out to the ranch at all. Yuh'll find it kinda rough, ma'am."

Dean, who knew a good deal about Ellen Mercer, chuckled softly. He reflected that if Burdick had been at the ranch three years ago, he might have taken a different course.

"Rough or not," said Ellen sharply, "I've come to take charge—to live at the T Bar M. Can't you get that through your head, Mr. Burdick?"

The listening cowboy sobered abruptly. In view of all that Burdick had said about his own plans, this outright statement was illuminating. He'd openly boasted that he was to have full control, but this sounded otherwise.

"No," he replied gruffly now, "I reckon I can't. A cow ranch is no place for a girl like you to live. Runnin' an outfit like the T Bar M is no woman's job. I've been promised a partnership—"

"There is only your word for that," Ellen cut in. "This is neither the time nor the place to argue it out, of course, but that is the fact. Please see about my rig and go about your business. I can take care of myself."

"Mebbe," Burdick grunted. "But I'm responsible for yore safety, I reckon. I can't see sendin' yuh out in a hired rig, with a driver picked up here in town, probably drunk before he starts. This is a big night, with a dance an' all, an'—"

Again the girl interrupted. "You've said all that. I don't intend to spoil any cowboy's fun, nor to interfere with your

plans. But I do intend to go out to the ranch—tonight. You can arrange for a rig, or I'll do so myself."

There was a moment of silence. Then Bob Dean stiffened to strained attention. A new tone came into Burdick's smooth voice even as he ostensibly surrendered.

"All right. Reckon I've done my duty. Since yo're bound to disregard my advice I'll see about a rig."

Heavy footsteps descended to the sidewalk, thumped solidly away. Lighter steps crossed the veranda, and then Dean heard the girl's voice again as she spoke to someone inside the hotel lobby. He hesitated, strongly tempted to go to her, held back by something akin to but stronger than a hunch. Whatever else she was, Ellen was Thad Mercer's daughter, strong-willed, stubborn and not to be turned back by argument once her mind was set. If she was bound to go to the T Bar M that night, nothing anyone could say would dissuade her from it. Moreover, on the face of it there was no good reason why she should not go. The ranch was her property, her home. Even if Burdick had talked out of turn, even if he had formed some secret alliance with Monk Vasco, there was no reason to suppose that any real danger would threaten the girl. Women were safe in the West; safe among outlaws as well as among men who rode within the law.

On the other hand, if wholesale rustling were the scheme, if Burdick planned to loot the T Bar M in furtherance of his understanding with Vasco, then Ellen's coming would force the issue. The play, Dean thought, could be managed in either of two ways. A gigantic theft could be carried out before the girl had a chance to discover what was going on. Or, more likely, Burdick would figure to make himself solid with her as he had been solid with Thad, and the thievery could be done gradually. Burdick was shrewd. He might even plan to steal the T Bar M to the verge of bankruptcy, and buy it in through someone else. The range was valuable, with its unfailing water and rich grass.

"I reckon it would be that way," Dean concluded. "They've been plannin' it for some time, which is why Monk was so set on havin' me an' Dusty travel outa here an' quit our pryin' around."

It seemed to him that his course was plain. If the plotters believed that he and Dusty had indeed gone away on Number Three, the partners would have more freedom of action than would be possible otherwise. The thing to do was to lay low and nose around until the real purpose of the alliance between the two men could be proven. In that way Ellen's interests could best be served, and an end made of the rustling which was cutting into the profits of most of the Buckthorn ranchers.

"Reckon I've heard enough," Dean mused, and moved back from the front of the hotel along the way he had come. "It would help to have her know what we suspect, but it's more important to keep in the dark."

So he smothered his yearning to see the girl who, since that never-to-be-forgotten summer, had held a place in his heart which no other woman might ever fill.

He reached the appointed meeting place, the hut which reared its crumbling walls alongside the north trail beyond the outskirts of town, to find that Dusty had not yet arrived. The moon, high above the rim of the valley now, beamed down serenely upon the rolling expanse of the range, gilded the jagged peaks of the Buckthorns, cast its softening glow upon the unlovely clutter of the town. On the soft warm air the yap of a coyote traveled lazily down the valley. A kind of melancholy took possession of the tall cowboy as he squatted down and built a smoke, and remembered that other night, three long years ago, when he'd ridden with Ellen to Yellow Horse Canyon.

"She was as far above me then as them stars," he murmured. "The distance is considerable farther now. . . . Shucks, what am I dreamin' of?"

The sound of hoofs aroused him when

Fenton rode out of a shallow wash.

"'Most time," he drawled. "Did yuh take them critters apart an' reassemble 'em?"

"Rearrangin' some of yore parts might work an improvement," retorted the waspish puncher. "I ain't a magician, tall feller. These broncs is plumb visible to the naked eye. Anyhow, yo're ahead of time. How come? Won't the lady admit she knows yuh? I shorely respect her judgment."

"Don't get het up. The test ain't been made yet."

Briefly, then, Dean related what he had overheard, indicated a sketchy plan of action. Fenton heard him through before speaking.

"Mebbeso this'll change yore plans some. I been seein' an' hearin', too. First, I see two male pole-kitties whisperin' quiet-like in the shadders. Monk an' Duke. They called Blaze Greely into it later, an' Blaze an' another hombre forked their broncs an' left town. After that Duke he dickered with Twenty-Mule Tompkins for a buckboard to be drove to the T Bar M by Nig Minter."

Dean stood up, and in the moonlight his face looked grim.

"Nig is keepin' bad company. Come along! We got some ridin' to do."

III

"What's Wrong at the T Bar M?"

IT is eighteen miles from Mesa City to the T Bar M. The first several miles are open country, well grassed, almost devoid of brush, but with occasional stands of cottonwood to break the monotony. In the moonlight these trees make purple blotches of shadow. Ellen Mercer found herself watching each clump as they neared it with a sort of strained attentiveness. Not ordinarily given to nervousness, she was impatient with herself, but the tension held.

The man who drove was a silent fellow. To begin with she had thought no more of him than of the horses attached to the buckboard; but after the lights of Mesa City dropped behind and the great loneliness of the valley closed in upon them, she became aware of him as a human being.

"What's your name?" she asked abruptly.

"Minter," he grunted.

"Are you a T Bar M rider?"

"Nope."

She bit her lip, unpleasantly impressed by his sullenness. The buckboard rattled and lurched onward steadily, the sound of it rising against the wall of silence. Presently she felt Minter's arm against her shoulder, moved away, made another try at conversation.

"I don't remember you. Have you been in the Buckthorn long?"

"Right smart," he mumbled.

Again his arm touched her shoulder, and with the sway of the rig rounding a curve in the road, he leaned against her heavily. She drew back, remembering with sudden distinctness Duke Burdick's disclaimer of responsibility for any driver he might obtain that night. Her lips tightened, and she gripped her hand-bag tensely, staring straight ahead.

Minter turned his head, peered at her fixedly. "Yuh shoulda stayed in fer the dance," he said. "But mebbe yuh like to drive in the moonlight, huh?"

He chuckled, moved nearer, his left arm sliding along the back of the seat. The team slowed to a walk up a long grade, where a low rise was topped by purple-shadowed trees.

"Come on, baby! Just a li'l'—"

"Take your arm away, Minter," said Ellen very quietly. "And attend to your driving."

With a leer he tightened his arm about her. She did not cry out, did not struggle. His head tipped toward her, and she felt his hot breath on her cheek. Then her left hand moved swiftly. Something hard jabbed against the third button of his shirt.

"Behave, Minter! Let me go, or I'll shoot!"

He grunted, glanced down at the

short-barreled pistol she gripped, jerked away from her as if stung. The end of the small gun continued to bore into his belly.

"My Gawd!" he gasped. "I believe yuh'd do it! Honest, miss, I didn't mean no harm. I—"

"I'd do it—quick as a wink!" Ellen snapped. "Pull up! Pull up, quickly!"

"Yeah!" He yanked the team to a stop. "What yuh goin' to do?"

"It's what you are going to do that matters. Twist the reins once around the whip. Now just hop over the wheel, Minter. And start walking—back toward town!"

"But I didn't mean no harm!" he protested. "I just figgered—"

"Wrong!" she cut in sharply. "Hop out!"

He hopped out. Then he swore and started to climb in again, and right then two horsemen swept out from the trees at the top of the hill.

Ellen, startled, looked around. Minter jumped for the heads of the team The horsemen raced down the road at full run. Ellen grabbed for the reins, but before she could get them loose Minter was hanging to the bits. She tried to draw a bead on him, but the horses shielded him.

"Look out for her popgun!" he yelled to the approaching riders.

Dropping the reins, Ellen took aim at the horseman to her right. But before she could pull the trigger the man whistled, a lilting bird call which she recognized instantly with a cry of unbelief. She lowered her pistol.

"Bob? Bob Dean?"

He vaulted down as his horse skidded to a stop. His long arm shot out, knocked Minter spinning almost under the hoofs of Dusty Fenton's pony. Then his two hands gripped Ellen's.

"Is it really you?" she breathed, not altogether steadily.

"In person," he assured her. "Gosh, it's good to see yuh again!"

She drew her hands away, looked up at him with the moonlight upon her face. For a moment neither of them could speak. To Dean it was a moment out of a dream, unbelievably sweet.

The spell was broken by Dusty's peevish query: "Do we peel this critter's hide? It wouldn't bring much, but it might be a lesson for him."

"Might do," Dean drawled, turning. "But there ain't time now. We'll tie him up an' stow him in back of the buckboard, I reckon."

"A walk wouldn't hurt him," Ellen suggested.

"No," agreed the tall cowboy. "But in spite of him bein' what he is, he can see an' talk pretty good. Turnin' him loose might spill too many beans."

"Yuh see an' talk pretty good yoreself," Dusty put in. "But yore conversation is plumb pointless. 'Course if there's a reason—"

"I plumb forgot," Dean chuckled. "Ellen, this relic of a misspent youth is Dusty Fenton. For a coupla years I've been doin' what I could for him without noticeable results. But he'll do to take along in a pinch."

"I know he will," said Ellen, putting out her hand to meet Dusty's reluctant one.

There was a quality of charm about the girl that appealed strongly to most people. Bob Dean marked his little partner's reaction to it with some amusement, but he was aware, too, of the need for a private talk with Thad Mercer's daughter.

"I figgered yuh wouldn't come back, Ellen," he said. "Now I'm wonderin' why yuh came alone. There's other things—"

Dusty broke in tactfully. "While you two have yore talk, I'll wheel this load up under them trees, where I can see both sides of the ridge."

Off he went, and again the tall cowboy faced his lady in the moonlight. He wanted more than he had ever wanted anything in his life to take her into his arms. But even if he'd had that right, this was neither the time nor the place. He made another abrupt beginning.

"It's gone around that the T Bar M

was to be sold. That's why I figgered yuh wouldn't come here no more."

"The talk was just that, Bob," she answered quietly. "The ranch is not for sale. If Burdick has said anything about having a partnership, that's wrong, too. He has no claim. The T Bar M is my home. I love it. I never would have gone away except for—for Mother. Now that I'm free, I've come back to stay."

He caught something in her voice. "Yore mother—"

"Didn't you know, Bob? She—she died . . . less than a week after we heard of father's death."

"Gosh!" Dean muttered unsteadily. "That's tough! I'm mighty sorry, Ellen. I never heard."

"She'd been ill for a long time," the girl continued. "The real shock was—was Father. I would have come at once, only Mother was so ill, and we were in Switzerland. Afterwards there were legal matters, and I came of age only last week. Even then my aunts and uncles put up a terrible row!" She laid her hand on his arm, looked up at him. "Bob, what's wrong at the T Bar M?"

"Nothin' that can't be righted, I reckon," he said slowly. "Some of us have had ideas, but all yuh can toss a rope over is that Burdick an' Monk Vasco have been makin' medicine on the quiet. Vasco is bad!" He hesitated, then frankly confessed to having listened in on her talk with her ranch manager, added something of his reasons for not having made his presence known in town. "It seems like there might be a chance to smoke out this business. Me an' Dusty is supposed to have left town, which gives us—you, if yuh want it so—an ace in the hole."

He waited then, but she did not speak at once. He looked up from contemplation of his unlighted cigarette to find her observing him curiously. All at once he was stung by the feeling that she was weighing and appraising him as if he had been an entire and absolute stranger. His lips thinned, and he looked away quickly. Then again he felt the light touch of her hand upon his arm.

"I do want it so," she said with quiet sincerity. But when she continued he sensed again, vaguely, an underlying reticence that puzzled him even more than it hurt. "You may be right about Burdick. Father trusted him, but temptation changes people. There's something at the T Bar M that he wants, that's certain. He tried his best to discourage me from going out there tonight, and I'm sure he put Minter up to —to being disagreeable. He may think —But I'm not easily stampeded!"

"Mebbe," Dean suggested thoughtfully, "yuh'd be better off in town, or with Miz Alcott at the Flyin' A."

Ellen shook her head, as he had known she would do. "No. I've got to get hold of things quickly. Part of the crew at least should be loyal. With you and Dusty to stand by—aces in the hole —I'm sure we can beat whatever crookedness Burdick is planning."

It seemed that way to Dean, although he was less confident than she appeared to be of the loyalty of any part of the present T Bar M crew. However, with Ellen at the ranch in her rightful position, Burdick's influence was sure to be weakened.

"Reckon I know better'n to argue with yuh," he said drily. "You an' Thad was shore cut off the same piece." Then, hastily, regretful of having mentioned her father: "We better make some plans of our own."

IV

Ellen Makes Discoveries

IT was almost midnight when the buckboard climbed the last steep rise and started down the final slope toward the T Bar M. Far behind lay the pleasant valley range, with its even contour and vast, unbroken expanses. This was foothill country, rugged and picturesque even in the moonlight. Towering bluffs rose abruptly on either side as they went down from the ridge. There were massive boulders and brush-

studded hills. Groves of lodge-pole pines, pungently fragrant, filled with mysterious shadows and ghostly whisperings of sound, loomed darkly on the higher reaches.

In spite of the lateness of the hour and the fact that the entire crew was supposed to be celebrating in Mesa City, lights gleamed in the sea of darkness which surrounded the ranch buildings. But as the rig jolted down the rough road a peculiar, eerie silence seemed to well up out of the night to engulf it; a silence in which the rattle of wheels and the clatter of hoofs sounded with oddly muffled distinctness. Ellen felt her nerves grow taut.

Beside her, the driver hunched forward, the lop brim of a soft felt hat drawn over his eyes, staring straight ahead. They did not speak. When they neared the ranch buildings, he turned the rig in front of the owner's house, a rambling adobe structure of many rooms, built about a central patio. Ellen was aware of furtive shapes lurking in the shadows all around, and then the door of the house opened and the square hulk of a man appeared against the yellow oblong of light.

"Well! I was beginnin' to wonder what had happened, Miss Ellen. Have a breakdown?"

It was Duke Burdick, somehow there ahead of them. Ellen spoke sharply.

"Just a slight argument with the driver. I'm afraid I don't care for your brand of humor, Mr. Burdick!"

Burdick came toward her.

"Told yuh I couldn't be responsible," he protested smoothly. "But I figgered I'd got a sensible man. Minter, I'll shore settle with you!"

"You needn't bother," snapped Ellen, stepping down swiftly to face him. "I'm not exactly a tenderfoot, you know. Right here"—her hand moved quickly—"I have something that showed Minter the error of his ways!"

Burdick jerked back on his heels with a startled grunt. "Hold on! Careful with that popgun, ma'am! It's li'ble to go off."

"That's right," agreed Ellen sweetly. "Have my baggage unloaded, please. And send Minter on his way. I don't want him around. And while these men—who are enjoying the dance in town!—get busy, suppose you and I have a little talk, inside. I'm curious about a number of things!"

Stepping forward, she literally drove Burdick back into the house. Inside, Ellen glanced swiftly about the big living-room. Her eyes softened at its familiar, home-like appearance, but they were also quick to discover certain things about that room. The big Navajo rugs were askew on the floor; the furniture looked as if it had been dragged hastily into place; wall ornaments and pictures showed signs of having been moved.

"The house ain't been used much," said Burdick. "When I got to thinkin' after yuh'd left town, I cut short my business an' rustled out by the short trail to get things fixed up some for yuh."

"I see," said Ellen. At the point of saying more, she closed her lips on the words.

Her trunk was carried in by a Mexican and a Chinese, and dumped on the floor.

"Yore old room is ready," Burdick added. "The bed's made up clean an' all. I figgered yuh'd be tired."

Suddenly Ellen knew that this was so. She was rather desperately tired. The thought of her old room waiting for her was alluring. It banished momentarily all other considerations, eased the tension on her nerves. She sighed and smiled and spoke more softly than she had done before.

"That was nice of you," she said. "I am tired. Perhaps after all we'd better postpone business until morning."

"Shore. Now that yo're here, there's plenty time for talkin', ma'am. In the mornin' yuh can meet the crew an' we can get down to cases. Which of this baggage will yuh need?"

Something about that smoothly spoken statement wasn't quite right, but

she dismissed it as the result of nerves and weariness. She indicated a suitcase and a traveling bag, which he picked up, then turned to let her go ahead of him into the patio.

She was at the inner door when there was a sudden burst of sound outside the house at the front. A rasping oath, a shout! Then a gunshot roared and a dozen men seemed to be yelling. Above the din rose the pound of hoofs, the whirr of swiftly rolling wheels, the clack and rattle of the departing buckboard.

Burdick dropped the bag and suitcase, wheeled and jumped for the outer door. Ellen's heart jambed tightly against her throat. She stood motionless, hardly breathing, and her blood seemed to run cold and sluggishly. The ranch manager disappeared and from the darkness she heard the rasp of his voice.

"What's the trouble here?"

"Hell," came the reply of another man. "Blaze said somethin' to Nig an' got hisself beaned with a whip-stock! Knocked him plumb cold, it did. The lady musta riled Nig proper! Haw! Haw!"

Ellen quivered, her eyes on the open door. Half a minute passed, then Burdick loomed there. His hard gaze jarred her. In it she read suspicion, a sudden wariness. Giving him no chance to speak, she went out into the patio, along the tiled gallery to her room.

He followed her, treading heavily, a square, solid hulk of a man. A man whom she knew to be as hard as flint and as immovable in his fixed course as the train which had brought her from the safety of the East to the hazardous adventure upon which she now was fully embarked. A man who could be an invaluable aid, as he had been to her father. But one who also could be a dangerous enemy.

"Good night," she said, facing him at the door of her room.

He set her bags inside. "If there's anythin' yuh want, just holler."

Closing the door upon his square back, she turned the key softly, hark-ened to the deliberate tramp of his retreating footsteps.

With a little shiver she turned, glanced about the well remembered room, took off her hat, her coat. But strangely the sense of security she had thought to find here did not come. The relics of her young girlhood which met her glance on every hand, the framed photos of her parents, an old rag doll, a braided quirt, an urn dug from the buried home of some Indian cave-dweller, possessed no magic to relax the tension that tightened its grip upon her. With a twisted smile she lifted her suitcase to the bed and unlatched it. And then again the silence which had fallen briefly upon the ranch was broken by a sudden rush of sound.

She jerked erect, faced the window which opened on the ranchyard. Through it came the mutter of men's voices, the thumping of spurred boots, the snort and stamp of horses. A familiar jumble, strange only in that it disturbed the quiet of midnight. A needle of ice slipped down Ellen's spine. Her finger-nails bit into the palms of her hands. The jarring suspicion of Burdick's glance when he returned to the house after the buckboard left came back to her vividly. Tight-lipped, she turned and picked up her pistol from the dresser where she'd laid it. But at the door she paused, smiled again twistedly, tossed the weapon onto the bed. If her authority must depend upon that, it would amount to little!

At the corrals men were busy roping and saddling horses. Near the house, Burdick stood with his back toward her as she came out. He was talking to a wiry man with a vicious hatchet face. This man muttered something, and Burdick faced about.

"Somethin' yuh want?"

His glance was hard, unfriendly. He did not move toward her.

"Yes. I want to know why these men are saddling up at this hour."

"They're takin' a ride," said Burdick flatly.

The hatchet-faced man grinned. El-

len's temper was strained, but she held it in check.

"So I judged," she retorted coolly. "If you must have it so exactly, Mr. Burdick, why do T Bar M cowboys ride at midnight?"

Burdick's eyes glinted. "I'm runnin' this outfit," he growled. "They ride when I tell 'em. Likewise, as I tried to tell yuh in town, runnin' a cow ranch ain't a job for a lady. There's things yuh don't savvy a-tall. Things that has to be done—"

"Not at this hour of the night," Ellen cut in sharply. "But let's not quibble, Burdick. You seem to have difficulty in remembering that I'm the owner of this ranch."

"I told yuh not to come out here," he grunted sullenly.

"Will you answer my question?" flared the girl.

"Shore!" His temper cooled as hers heated. He even smiled. "The boys are goin' to follow that buckboard. Blaze, here, got a squint at yore driver, an' it turns out he wasn't Minter a-tall. Seems he was a desperate character which has needed attention for some time!"

"An' he's gettin' his deservin's right soon!"

This was Greely who, having expressed himself, turned and limped toward the corrals. Ellen stood stiff and straight, her dark eyes meeting the stare of the ranch manager squarely.

"Burdick, I'm giving orders now. Have your men unsaddle. There'll be no riding tonight!"

He moved his head. "I'm runnin' this outfit," he said evenly. "Yuh better go inside."

Her lips moved, tightened. She went past him swiftly, following Greely. He made no attempt to stop her. There was a woodpile and a chopping block not far from the nearest corral. She stepped onto the block, raised her voice above the din, and at the sound of it the men stopped their activities and faced her curiously.

"Wait!" she cried. "You men must know who I am. I'm Thad Mercer's daughter. This is my ranch, my outfit. From now on I'm running it. Burdick won't take orders, so he's through—here and now. But that needn't make any difference to the rest of you. Any man who wants to keep his job may stay on under a new foreman. Those who do, step forward where I can see you, please!"

Her eyes swept the circle of brown, hard faces. Burdick came to a halt near-by, rolling a smoke, calm and apparently unconcerned. Not a sound followed her appeal, not a man moved. A chill crept over Ellen. It was unbelievable! Rangeland loyalty was traditional—and yet she had no authority over these men who were on her payroll!

"Told yuh I was runnin' this outfit," Burdick growled. "All right, boys, get goin'. Blaze, yo're in charge."

He gripped Ellen's arm. A shudder of fear and loathing swept away her paralysis. With a smothered gasp she wrenched loose, turned and ran into the house.

V

Ambushed

THE buckboard rattled swiftly up the road to the crest of the ridge, started down the other side. The lights of the ranch vanished. It was nearly two miles farther on when a couple of horsemen rode out in front of it. The driver drew rein, chuckling.

"Duck soup," he drawled.

"A fool for luck," snapped Dusty Fenton. "The next time I get me a pardner, he's goin' to have common sense as part of his assets."

Bob Dean stepped over the wheel and shrugged out of Minter's coat. He passed the garment and the lop-brimmed black hat over to their owner, in exchange for his own.

"How's Nig been behavin'? Dawggone, fella, yuh got a reputation to live up to from now on! I done busted Blaze Greely over the head with the butt of yore whip—for which I hereby hand over to you, free, gratis an' for nothin', full credit!"

Minter moaned. "Gawd! He'll gun me for it, damn yuh!"

"Here's hopin' he does a proper job," rasped Dusty. "Get up there, now, we're headin' for town."

"Not so fast," cautioned the tall partner. "We better cache him yonder in the line camp, where he won't talk outa turn."

The line camp was about a mile off the road, reached by an arcing wagon track which forked into the main road above and below it. Having disposed of Minter to their satisfaction, Dusty again mounted to the seat of the buckboard. He was to return the rig to the livery in town and get in touch with four or five dependable cowboys who might be needed in a showdown with the rustlers.

"There'll be regular jobs for 'em once Ellen starts cleanin' up at the T Bar M," said Dean.

"I reckon yuh'll be roddin' the spread," remarked Dusty.

"Yuh reckon wrong," stated the tall partner quietly. "All I'm doin' is standin' by durin' the ruckus. After that"—he licked down the lap of a quirlie—"I've still got some travelin' to do."

Dusty grunted. He understood very well indeed what was in Bob Dean's mind.

"With yore hankerin' for travel, yuh should take on this job. How one hombre can be so ornery an' wuthless an' plumb lazy as you, is shorely a puzzle. Always pick on me when there's anythin' resemblin' work to be done."

"Ain't it the truth," Dean agreed amiably. "But get goin' now, else yuh won't get to town before dawn."

Dusty picked up the reins. "Watch yore footin', tall feller. It's bad enough to put up with yuh all in one piece!"

The team started. Dean swung into the saddle, turned his horse the other way. Since Burdick and at least part of the T Bar M crew were back at the ranch, it seemed to the partners that a cattle drive of some sort might be attempted during the night. It was important to keep in touch with the rustlers, therefore, and find out what they did with the stolen stock. This was to be Dean's job.

Riding without haste, ten minutes later he neared the upper fork where the wagon track joined the main road. Suddenly, behind him, staccato with distance, came the sound of gunfire. He reined in sharply, jaw muscles bunched, lips tight. As he did so, three horsemen swept out from a stand of cottonwoods and charged down upon him, guns spitting flame and lead.

Dean's horse reared and whirled. The cowboy pitched from the saddle as if jerked by a taut rope.

With triumphant yells the three riders came down the slope. Their yells were drowned in the crash and roar of Bob Dean's guns. Crouching in the shadows of a big manzanita bush, the tall cowboy shot to kill. The thunder of shots rose to a tremendous climax, ended as abruptly as it had begun. A smoking weapon in either hand, Dean paced forward warily.

Riderless horses galloped wildly off into the darkness. A wounded man groaned. A dead man huddled face down in the dust of the road. The third man reared up, choked and pitched down, kicking and clawing. Below, toward Mesa City, the staccato sound of gunfire still sputtered through the night. Dean made sure the three killers were harmless, then headed at a limping run up the hillside to his right, where his horse, snorting and trembling, stood tangled in the brush.

Vaulting up, he spurred down into the road, lifted his mount to a run, tore hellbent along toward that distant gunfire. Somewhere there Dusty had run into another ambush. The tall partner did not spare his horse. He thumbed fresh loads into his guns as he rode.

The shooting ahead ended abruptly. Grim-faced, Bob spurred on. For an endless time the only sound was the throbbing beat of racing hoofs, the rush of the cool night air past his ears. Then suddenly his heart leaped exultantly. Ahead of him a forty-five boomed and

crashed; other guns answered it. Dusty was still alive!

Dean came to an elbow bend in the road, checked his horse sharply, turned it up the steep slope to the left where the point of a ridge ran down. Beyond the end of the ridge was the lower fork where the wagon track twisted through a brush-choked wash and up to join the main road that led from the line camp. The tall partner knew what the ambushers were up against, having failed to get Dusty in their first attack.

On the crest of the ridge he pulled up, slid down, dropped the reins. On foot, he plunged down the farther slope. It was barren of brush, strewn sparsely with boulders. The moonlight cast the cowboy's shadow behind him, illumined with remarkable distinctness the scene below. The buckboard was overturned at the rim of the wash. A man crouched behind it and, as Dean looked, raised himself and fired into a clump of scrub oaks off to the right. Another gun blazed a few yards to the left. From the oaks came the crash and boom of Dusty's answering shots.

Bob worked on down the hillside, unnoticed. He spotted two more of Dusty's assailants. Four men had the little puncher blocked in. They were maneuvering toward a concerted rush, yet were wary of Dusty's guns. Dean flattened himself behind a boulder, eyes squinting toward the man behind the buckboard. When that hombre moved and straightened, the tall partner beat him to it. At the crash of the shot the ambusher jerked erect, swayed and pitched forward on his face. He did not move again.

From the oaks came Dusty's shrill war-cry. "Yee-ee-ow! Give 'em hell, boy! Ye-ee-ow!"

A lead slug flattened against the boulder in front of Dean. Quick as light he sent three bullets searching the brush, where the gun had blazed. Dusty also went into action. The outlaws, caught behind the crossfire, shot wildly. Again blasting sound rent the silence, rolled away with echoes, ceased with startling abruptness. From the brush came a choked, fearful cry.

"I quit! Gawd'lmighty, don't shoot no more!"

A man heaved upright, arms raised high. A second later another joined him, holding up but one arm, yelling that he was wounded. The third groaned that he was too badly hit to move.

"How yuh fixed, Dusty?"

"Pinked some, but not serious," replied the little puncher, strangely cheerful. "Got them skunks spotted, tall feller?"

The round-up was quickly made. The dead man behind the buckboard proved to be Blaze Greely. Having located the partners at the line camp, he'd laid a double-barreled ambush, with orders to shoot to kill. One of the survivors, called Big Nose Ed, was quite talkative. He explained that Bob Dean had been recognized as the driver of the buckboard that brought Ellen Mercer to the T Bar M.

"It was a lousy layout, if yuh ask me," he said.

"I didn't," grunted Dean, winding a neckcloth about Dusty's wounded left arm. "Seems you hombres take yore killin' orders plumb easy!"

Another of the survivors cut in. "Ed, you talk too damn much. We had our orders, Dean, an' Blaze was boss. That's all."

"It's plenty," agreed the tall partner grimly. "The habits of some two-legged critters is shorely hard to understand, but that doesn't matter. Blaze got his full payment, an' the rest of yuh got yores."

Greely and these others, in all truth, were unimportant in comparison with the light cast by their act upon the character and intentions of Duke Burdick. And Bob himself had delivered Ellen into Burdick's hands!

Having done what he could for the wounded, Dean got his horse from the ridge and succeeded in rounding up the team and Dusty's bronc, which had broken away and escaped uninjured. The need for quick action pressed upon

him. This attack presaged ominous events to follow, with Ellen in the storm center, alone and unprotected.

"What now?" asked Dusty. "Do I chaperon them skunks while you enjoy yoreself?"

The tall cowboy shook his head. Help could not be fetched from town or elsewhere until after sunrise, and by then, he judged, it would be too late. The ruthless attempt to kill himself and Dusty made it only too apparent that Duke Burdick had gone wolf, in everything that term implied!

"We've got to handle it ourselves. There can't be many more of them skunks at the T Bar M. We've got to get Ellen outa their hands before the rest of the gang shows up. I was a fool to figger she'd be safe there, with Burdick playin' a crooked game with the Monk! No! We've got to move fast. If yore arm ain't too bad—"

"Talk sense!" snapped Dusty. "My arm ain't no handicap. It's somethin' to know that yu've got yore eyes open at last, tall feller. We'll hogtie this bunch in the buckboard, take the bridles off the critters, an' let the hosses take 'em to town. The hosses'll go home."

Dean improved upon the scheme by scrawling a note on a slip of paper, addressing it to the livery-stable man and secreting it where it would be found when the horses were unhitched.

"Greely was Burdick's man," remarked Dusty as the partners rode toward the T Bar M. "But them other skunks travel with Vasco's wild bunch."

"This business has me beat," Dean said grimly. "Ambushin' us looks foolish. Rustlers ain't killers. A man like Burdick doesn't turn wolf without a powerful reason."

"It wasn't so foolish," Dusty pointed out. "We've made it plain we know somethin', he don't know how much or what. It would worry him, with Miss Ellen comin' back. Still, we're supposed to've hopped Number 3 this evenin'. Nobody knows we came back, except—"

He stopped abruptly, but Bob Dean was far ahead of him. Ellen knew that they'd returned to the Buckthorn. Burdick would have to count on keeping her silent. The closer you examined it, the uglier the deal appeared. There was something more at stake, it seemed to him, than the looting of the Mercer ranch.

The partners rode knee to knee, swiftly. When they approached the ridge west of the T Bar M they slowed to a walk to breathe the horses.

"There's a card hid in this game which we haven't had a peek at yet," Dean said then. "Likewise, henceforth an' hereafter, when yuh accuse me of lackin' brains, I'm admittin' it in advance!"

"That's news! But what's bitin' yuh?"

Dean struck his fist against the horn of his saddle.

"This: Ellen allowed she knew why Burdick didn't want her at the ranch. Then she switched the talk, an' I plumb forgot until right now!"

"Which," stated Dusty waspishly, "is probably what she counted on. If she'd wanted yuh to know, she'd have told yuh."

There was no comfort in this. Reining his horse beneath the limbs of a giant pine tree at the crest of the ridge, the tall partner stared down grimly into the sea of darkness below. Two lights glimmered there, like low-hung stars, and again a sort of eerie silence seemed to well up from the hidden ranch buildings.

Suddenly Dusty started, uttered a muffled exclamation. The brooding silence was broken by the muffled sound of gunshots—*sput—sput—sput!* Three shots, evidently fired from a small-caliber gun, down there where the lights flickered below the ridge.

Bob Dean, the feeling of death in his heart, lifted the reins off the neck of his horse, checked himself, rigid, as a sudden shift of the light wind brought other sounds to his keen ears. These came from behind, toward Mesa City. The throbbing beat of shod hoofs!

"Trouble trails us!" muttered the tall

partner grimly. "What lies ahead comes first. We'll take 'em as they come!"

VI

"It's Got to Be a Showdown"

FOR a long time the house had been filled with a silence like that of death. Locked in her room, Ellen knelt beside an open window. A whiff of tobacco smoke assured her that the guard she had detected there before was still on the job. What had become of Burdick she did not know, but she did know that she was a prisoner in her room. Whatever Burdick's game, he held the whip hand, the winning hand. She would have to give him what he wanted as the price of her own life. She would not let herself think of a possible alternative.

Suddenly she stiffened, held her breath. Faint and far away she thought she heard the sound of gunfire! Tears rose in her eyes, and she choked down a sob. The dreadful fear that had gnawed at her heart since she heard Blaze Greely and his men ride away on the trail of the buckboard became a stabbing agony. In times of stress the husks of convention are stripped off. Realities are forced upon us. Ellen Mercer knew now that if Bob Dean should be killed that night, she herself would not want to live longer.

"I love him—I've always loved him! That's the real reason why I came back—and I let him go away—let him take this great risk! Please God, don't let them hurt him!"

The tramp and click of booted feet along the tiled patio roused her. She scrambled to her feet, dragged her wrist across her eyes, faced the door tensely. The footsteps paused; a heavy hand struck the panel of the door. Burdick's rasping voice called her name.

"Open up! I want to talk to yuh!"

A shiver broke the tension upon her. She moved swiftly to the bed, picked up her small pistol, again faced the door as he banged at it.

"I ain't goin' to hurt yuh, yuh fool!"

"Do you think I'd trust you now?" she asked sharply. "I'm armed, Burdick, and I'm staying in this room until I'm ready to come out. Say what you've got to say—I'm listening!"

Her defiance seemed to infuriate him. He swore viciously, struck the door a blow that made it shiver.

"Yuh'll come out, or by hell I'll haul yuh out!" he roared. "We'll do our talkin' face to face an' there'll be no stallin' an' no tricks!"

Understanding came to Ellen in a sickening wave. She realized to the full the utter hopelessness of her predicament, the folly of believing for one instant that there could be any alternative that would save her. What Burdick wanted he would get—and he would take no chance of having her talk afterwards!

Strangely enough, however, the knowledge steadied her, once the first horrible sweep of despair passed. She backed away from the door a little, gripping her small gun. The tough fiber of Thad Mercer showed itself in her then. With narrowed eyes she watched the quivering door, reckoned the chances of its withstanding Burdick's furious assault. She raised her voice above the din he made.

"Get away from that door, Burdick! I'm going to shoot!"

Aiming high, she fired three shots through the upper panel. When the echoes died away, she heard the clatter of his boot heels along the patio gallery towards the back of the house.

"Pedro!" he yelled. "Fetch an ax! Hump yorself!"

Instantly Ellen was at the door. She jerked it open, slipped through it, drew it shut behind her and fled like a slim ghost across the patio to a room in the opposite wing.

This was the side of the house farthest from the corrals. It also was in the shadow of the moon. Peering out of a softly opened window, Ellen saw only darkness. Quietly she eased herself over the sill. As her feet struck the ground she thought she heard horses far away

on the road towards the ridge. Without pause she started on the run, meaning to circle the bunkhouse and come around on the far side of the corrals. Before she had taken three steps there was a fresh outburst of cursing inside the house.

"Hell! She's stole away! Tony! Pete! Watch them hosses!"

Ellen sped on at top speed. Too late she saw a dark shape move away from the side of the bunkhouse. She tried to dodge, stumbled. Strong hands grabbed her.

"Here she is! I got her, Duke! I—Gawd!"

A vicious kick on the shin loosened the man's grip. Ellen wrenched free, fired point blank when he swayed after her. But as she started to run again a man closed in on either side of her. It was Burdick who slapped the gun from her hand even as she pulled the trigger.

Like a trapped wildcat she fought, but vainly. Burdick's strength was enormous. He clamped his arms about her, lifted her bodily, kicking and struggling as she was. She got one arm free, hammered at his face with her clenched fist, clawed at him with her fingers. Cursing, he dropped her, struck her in the face, wrenched her wrists behind her back.

All at once there was a rush and rumble of hoofs. A horseman loomed out of the darkness. One of Burdick's men yelled. A sixgun blazed and roared. Ellen, suddenly released, stumbled and fell almost under the feet of the tall man who vaulted down from the back of his rearing horse.

"Bob! Oh, Bob, I thought they'd k-killed you!"

"Ellen!"

She was in his arms, clinging to him madly, and he was holding her fast. Then behind them there was a clatter of hoofs, the thunder of gunshots.

Dean went around on the jump, whirling Ellen behind him. It was Dusty Fenton and Burdick. In spite of being covered by the cowboy's gun, the foreman made a desperate play. Ranged up between his two men, one of whom had been wounded by Ellen's pistol shot, he suddenly shoved this unfortunate headlong at the little puncher. Then, with the other man at his heels, he raced for the horses that stood saddled and ready at the corner of the house. Away they went, bending low over the necks of their mounts, while Dusty furiously untangled himself and sent wild shots harmlessly after them.

"Damnation!" sputtered the waspish cowboy. "They'll have the pack on us now!"

It seemed the truth. Already fast-riding horsemen were topping the ridge, sweeping down upon the ranch. They would be more of the rustler gang, possibly headed by Monk Vasco himself. Moreover, they undoubtedly had picked up the buckboard with its load of ambushers, and hence would be advised of what was going on.

"What's done is done," said Bob Dean calmly. "Cryin' over spilt water is plumb futile. Ellen, what's been goin' on here?"

Strangely enough his calmness, the fact that through some seeming miracle he had escaped the guns of the assassins, did more to destroy the girl's morale than had her own lone plight and fight to escape from Burdick. She gripped his arm, spoke unsteadily, breathlessly:

"Bob, it doesn't seem possible! He sent Greely—those others— Are you really all right—you and Dusty?"

Dusty grunted something, plugging fresh loads into his guns. Instead of answering her the tall cowboy stiffened, grew tense. His head lifted and turned.

"Listen!" he muttered.

She heard it then—the drumming of hoofs that came not only from the direction of the ridge, but from the upper end of the valley as well! Armed men, she knew, were riding down upon the ranch from two directions. She shivered, felt momentarily the surge and sweep of horrible fear. Then her chin

went up, even as Bob Dean's quiet voice echoed her thought.

"Two wolf packs 'stead of one. They're shore crowdin' in on us!"

"If I knowed the meanin' of half of this," Dusty complained, "I might enjoy it more. Tall feller, yuh better start trailin' with Miss Ellen. I'll kinda slow up some of them—"

Crash! Gunflame streaked the darkness. A bullet whined close to Bob Dean's head, between him and Ellen, smacked into the adobe wall behind them. Instantly his arm reached out, hauled the girl roughly to the ground, while Dusty flung two swift shots at the flash of the hidden gun. The echoes caught and whipped away the ugly sound, and again on the still air was only the thrumming beat of shod hoofs, coming swiftly down upon the ranch.

"So!" muttered the tall cowboy after a long moment. "We might have knowed it, Dusty. Playin' tag in the moonlight with them hombres ain't goin' to work out so well. Hug the shadders, Ellen, an' come this way!"

Silently, swiftly, he directed and urged the girl along close to the wall, around the end of the house. He followed and Dusty brought up the rear. Sheltered by the wing, they rose to their feet, and then Ellen spoke hurriedly.

"That was a warning! He means to have his way. We can't fight them all, not without help—and he'd never let us— Oh, I'll get what Burdick wants —give it to him—give him everything —if only—"

It was her fear for Bob Dean that spoke. To know that because of her he had escaped one death trap only to ride into another that was worse, was more than she could bear. Dean's grip upon her shoulder, the tone of his quiet voice, checked her.

"So there *is* somethin'! That hole card we ain't seen yet, Dusty. Well, I reckon it's too late to matter now."

"It can't be!" Ellen cried. "Listen—"

Breathlessly she told them of a letter written by Thad Mercer while he lay dying in the hospital at Junction. Addressed to her, it had gone to Switzerland and followed her back to the United States. Then, since she was not yet of age, her relatives had insisted that it should be turned over to her lawyers, who had done the obvious thing. Believing that Mercer had dictated the letter while delirious, that the content was too fantastic to be true, they'd written to Burdick to check up. His answer had confirmed their opinion, but it had hastened Ellen's departure West when she heard of it.

"If they'd only let me have my way! But they thought Burdick was honest, and that Father was— Bob, you know him. You know how stubborn he could be. Well, when he quarreled with the Mesa Bank a few weeks before—before he died, he drew out all his money and vowed he'd never put another cent into any bank."

Nor had he, she continued. Instead, he'd kept his available cash in a secret hiding place at the ranch. It was a cache known only to himself and to Ellen, to whom he had once disclosed the secret. According to his last letter, there was in the cache at the time of his death the money received from a recent sale of beef, and an additional sum.

"Must be quite a wad," said the tall partner, a strange note in his quiet voice.

"Nearly forty thousand dollars!" breathed Ellen.

"Jingo!" muttered Dusty Fenton. "No wonder Burdick's gone wolf, if he knows that!"

"He knows," said the girl. "I reckon he's been hunting for it all this time. That's what he wants! I'll give it to him—all of it—"

Dusty muttered something under his breath. Bob Dean shook his head. Ellen's breath caught in a smothered gasp, and all at once she realized how hysterically she had been talking. She shivered, stiffened, and again her chin went up. Reaction set in powerfully, made her once more her normal self, calm and cool headed.

"Of course," she acknowledged. "It

would make no difference now. Burdick has gone too far to stop!"

"It's got to be a show down," Dean agreed gently. "We'll give them skunks a fight!"

VII

A Tough Spot

FOR a few minutes the ranch was the scene of well directed activity. The small stone house, which they had selected to be their place of defense rather than the ranch house, was a relic of the days of Indian warfare. Built of boulders set in mortar, in the shape of a round house, it stood east of the other ranch buildings and was used only for storage now.

Keeping under cover as well as possible, they moved out some of the junk, then installed Ellen there with a rifle and ammunition brought from the house. Occasionally a gunshot crashed and a bullet whined through the air, but the real attack was slow to come. The drumming of hoofs died away, and brooding silence settled down upon the ranch. Silence more grimly ominous than any sound. The moon was low. In another half hour it would be gone.

Dean held a muttered conference with Dusty, who thereafter vanished. Ellen knew that they were planning to stake horses out somewhere, in the hope that after moondown one of them might be able to slip away for help. She knew also that Dean had little hope of success in this effort. A sudden impulse made her disobey orders and slip into the kitchen of the ranch house, where she stirred up a fire, made coffee.

"Yuh need a special guardian," said Dean, coming in upon her. "Doggone, it gave me a scare when I found yuh missin'!"

"An army must eat," she answered lightly. "Lend a hand and we'll carry our provisions into the fort."

The lull lasted while they accomplished this. Dean was at the door of the stone house, drinking a cup of black coffee and munching a sandwich, when Dusty came back as quietly as he had stolen away.

"They're playin' safe," he reported. "Got a ring clean around us. Reckon they're waitin' for the moon to give 'em darkness. I got them hosses staked, but— Say, tall feller, how come you've got special favors?"

"Here's your coffee, Dusty," said Ellen. "There's plenty more. And sandwiches. Don't accuse me falsely!"

"No, ma'am, but how about givin' me a break? This long-legged cuss ain't so much. Take me—"

"Pay no attention to him," Dean drawled. "His idea of a woman is a well trained squaw. Strong in the back, weak in the head. Able an' willin' to support him in luxurious idleness."

Ellen laughed. "And what might your idea be, Mister Bob Dean?"

"I'll tell yuh when there's more time," he promised. "It's a long story, an' the settin' must be right. Needs a risin' instead of a settin' moon, an'—"

"I'll fill your cup," said Ellen hastily, taking it from him.

When she had recovered her equanimity and returned to the door, however, he was gone and Dusty stood a couple of paces away from the building, staring fixedly toward the ridge. The darkness was very intense now, but in spite of it the watching girl was aware of the tenseness of the little cowboy's pose. She could hear nothing, see nothing, yet suddenly her heart jambed hard against her throat and for a moment she was frozen by terror.

She fought against the feeling with all her inherent pluck and stubbornness. Turning back inside the stone house, she got rid of the cup of coffee, picked up her father's rifle. Again at the door, she saw Bob's tall shape materialize out of the shadows and pause near his partner. Her straining ears caught the mutter of their voices, and then Dean came on toward her. Beyond him she saw Dusty move and vanish silently.

Bob edged in through the door, touched her arm, spoke softly.

"It'll be soon now, I reckon. Ellen,

we might better face the fact. This is a tough spot. The stake makes it bad. Burdick is smart an' set upon collectin' that forty thousand. Vasco's a fightin' man. If we beat this hand, we've got to carry the fight to 'em. An' at the same time, we've got to make plumb shore yo're safe."

"I understand, Bob," she said steadily. "I'm not afraid—now!"

"Good girl!" he muttered, squeezing her arm. "We'll give 'em a fight. Here's yore orders. Dusty an' me are goin' to scout around an' see what damage we can do. You keep inside, with the door shut an' barred. If any of them skunks come nosin' around, plug 'em *pronto*. In case either of us comes back, we'll sneak in close to the wall an' knock three times low down on the door."

"Bob, if they—"

"It's a chance that's got to be took, Ellen," he answered gently. "But I'm playin' a hunch we'll come through."

He started to go then but she caught him by the arm, drew him around to face here, with the darkness so complete that she could see only the dim outline of him.

"Before you go, Bob, I—I want to tell you something." Her low pitched voice broke, steadied. "It wasn't the money—or the ranch—that brought me back here, Bob. It was you—you—because, you see, I love you, Bob! I want you to know—to understand—nothing else matters!"

She heard the hiss of his breath, felt him tremble. And then his arms were around her, holding her against his pounding heart. She took his face between her hands, pulled his head down to hers, and in the meeting of their lips the dangers that lurked about that old stone house ceased to exist. For a long moment the world stood still.

Almost roughly he thrust her away, held her at arm's length with his hands gripping her shoulders.

"Ellen, honey," he muttered, "before you came I'd never looked at a woman. Since then, it ain't been possible. I thought I had too much pride to do this, but I reckon not. I love yuh! An' with you carin' so— Well, we've just got to beat this thing, honey!"

His fingers tightened, relaxed. Before she could move or speak he was gone.

VIII

Guns in the Dark!

IT was so dark now that objects a yard distant were barely visible. Having rid himself of chaps and spurs, Bob was able to move with little sound. Nevertheless, caution was more important than haste. It took him five minutes to reach the corner of the nearest of the several adobe-walled corrals, where a band of some fifteen or twenty horses milled nervously.

As he crouched there, every nerve and sense tautened to the utmost, slight but significant sounds assured him that the circling outlaws were closing in slowly upon the ranch buildings. He crept silently along the mud wall toward the corral gate. He was almost at his goal when suddenly he sensed danger ahead. Instantly he froze in his tracks, one hand gripping a drawn gun, lips thinned over his set teeth.

"That you, Pete?" came a hoarse whisper. "Gawd, it's dark!"

"Yeah!" grunted the tall cowboy. And then, in one swift, concerted movement, he leaped, struck and caught the sagging body of the outlaw.

Again he crouched, tense and alert, eyes searching the darkness, ears straining. But apparently the thud of his gun barrel and the slump of the other man's limp body had not been heard. Like a gliding shadow he moved on to the gate, fumbled for the fastening.

The gate swung outward, creaked softly, and the horses bolted away from it. Dean eased into the enclosure, guns in his hands, tense as a bowstring. The horses bunched on the far side of the corral, snorting. He sidled along the wall, got behind them. Again they bolted away, and the leader found the open gate.

Right then the cowboy went into action. With a wild yell he thumbed his guns. Bullets churned into the ground at the heels of the frightened horse band. They broke into a mad stampede, poured out of the corral. They swept across the ranchyard in a compact bunch. Like a thunderbolt they struck the ring of circling outlaws.

A scream of agony rose from a trampled man. And then pandemonium broke loose. All around the ranch guns burst into roaring sound, streaking the darkness with crimson and yellow flame. Wild yells and curses added to the uproar.

Hugging the ground behind the mud wall of the corral, Bob grinned and plugged fresh loads into his guns. Bullets snicked into the adobe, buzzed angrily overhead, but none found him. Most of the outlaws were shooting at shadows, and some of them hit their own companions. It seemed that at least two dozen men were shooting and yelling.

Presently the tumult died down. Above the subsiding din could be heard the wrathful voice of Monk Vasco, shouting furiously.

"Hell an' damnation! Yo're a bunch of goddam lousy sheep! What the hell are yuh shootin' at? Shadders, by hell! An' hittin' each other, yuh blitherin' fools! Lay off! Lay off!"

While Vasco raved and cursed and restored some semblance of order among his men, the tall cowboy moved off again, hugging the ground, with the caution of a stalking Indian.

Beyond the ranch buildings, aided by the confusion, he headed for a huge haystack. He was kneeling behind it, fumbling for matches, when a second uproar began. This time it was the saddle horses of the wild bunch that stampeded. Dusty Fenton had discovered them left in charge of one man, several hundred yards along the ridge road. The little puncher's war-cry, the crash and boom of his guns, was the first warning. Then came the horses, with the waspish cowboy riding their tails.

Dean chuckled and struck a match.

"If them skunks craved privacy, they're plumb disappointed," he mused, watching the tiny flames lick hungrily into the hay. "This will shed plenty light upon all and sundry, too!"

Back he stared toward the corrals. Aided by the light wind, the flames mounted rapidly. Light leaped up, spread in a widening circle, illumined with startling distinctness trees and brush and buildings and running men. Beyond the light Dusty Fenton was shooting, picking off the raiders as they scattered like quail hunting cover.

Alongside the corral wall, Dean crouched low and also began to shoot. Two men went down. And then suddenly, above all other sounds, he heard one that froze his blood. A scream—shrill, sharp, abruptly checked. Ellen's voice!

Instantly the tall cowboy leaped up, broke into a stiff-legged run, heading for the stone house. Guns blazed at him as he ran. Bullets snarled about his ears, snipped his hat, ripped his clothing. Something struck his left shoulder, spun him about, nearly dropped him. He caught himself up, fired at a man who leaped for him, stumbled on.

The stone house was just ahead. The door was open, and when he was within ten feet of it he heard another scream. Then a man came out, half carrying, half shoving the struggling girl. The man was a square and solid hulk. Duke Burdick. He sighted Dean as the cowboy rushed on, not daring to shoot.

A powerful arm clamped down around Ellen, smothered her struggles, hugged her hard against the renegade foreman. Holding her so, Burdick backed against the solid wall beside the door. A gun glinted in his hand leveled across the girl's slim shoulder.

"Yuh asked for it, Dean!" he yelled, and pulled the trigger.

With the blaze of the gun, the tall cowboy pitched down to the left. At the same instant Ellen, who had hung limply upon Burdick's supporting arm, came alive. She wrenched desperately

sideways, shoved down with her full weight and strength upon the arm that held her.

Hot lead scorched Dean's cheek. Again he swayed forward, holding his fire. Like a wildcat Ellen clawed and kicked and tore herself free. As she spun away Burdick whirled back against the wall, again swung down his gun. Swift as light Bob Dean thumbed the hammer of his gun twice. The slashing pain of a bullet glanced along his ribs. Burdick jerked back, swayed and crashed down, firing again as he fell.

"Look out, Bob!"

At the scream, the tall cowboy flung himself to the right and whirled. A bullet thudded into the stone wall in line with the spot where he had been. He glimpsed a massive shape, a brutish scowling face, swaying toward him. The roar of his gun blended with the boom of Vasco's weapon.

A heavy blow knocked Bob backward. The wall of the stone house saved him from going down. Vasco swayed before his dizzy gaze. By a mighty effort of will he raised his right-hand gun, fired again. And then Vasco was not in front of him any more.

Bracing himself grimly, Dean held his head up, squinted against the blackness that threatened to swallow him. He could not raise his left arm, but his right-hand gun circled upon the man who ringed him there. And then Ellen was beside him, armed with her rifle, and from behind the outlaws came the whine of a peevish voice:

"Quit or die, yuh sidewinders! Make yore choice right now!"

One of the outlaws made a move. The roar of a gun came instantly, and the man went down without even pulling the trigger. But for another moment the thing hung in the balance. Then one of the wild bunch threw down his weapons, jerked his arms overhead. The rest followed.

While Dean and Ellen stood guard, the waspish Fenton made sure that the surrendered men held out no hidden guns. Then, after a swift conference with Dean, the little puncher rounded up the saddle stock and gave curt orders.

"Fork yore broncs an' drift! It's better'n yuh deserve, but we can do better without yore company. Only get this, yuh scum: Keep clear of the Buckthorn after this. Vasco's dead, an' Burdick is dyin'. Yore outfit is plumb busted. Vamoose—an' keep travelin'!"

A short time afterward, in the kitchen of the ranch house, Ellen dressed Bob's wounds while Dusty looked on with apparent disgust.

"Yuh must have left the door open against orders," said Dean. "Ellen, yuh'll have to learn better'n that!"

"When all that shooting started," she answered unsteadily, "and all the yelling—and then the fire—I was frightened. I thought—I thought they'd killed you, Bob! And I didn't care what happened to me, if they had done that. So I just had to look, to see what was going on. I opened the door. Burdick was right there. He must have guessed where I was. He grabbed me before I could move."

The tall partner nodded. "He made a full confession before he died. Ellen, it was him that gunned Thad—shot him from ambush—all on account of that forty thousand dollars, which he never could find!"

"He meant to kill you and Dusty and me, too," said the girl in a low voice. "He told me."

Dusty eyed the pair of them glumly and started to go out of the kitchen. Bob and Ellen moved together. One on either side, they caught and held him.

"Yuh goin' somewhere?" queried Dean.

"Is it yore business, tall feller?" snapped Dusty peevishly. "There's no sense in me stickin' around here. Everythin' is finished."

"Shucks, yuh bat-eared maverick!" exploded the tall partner. "What's finished ain't a marker to what's beginnin'. An' yo're in the game to stay, if I have to hogtie yuh. *Sabe?*"

"Indeed you are," Ellen chimed in.

"We're all three in partnership, beginning now!"

"He'll make a passable range boss," grinned Bob, winking at Ellen. "With me handy to do what thinkin' is necessary."

Dusty swallowed hard, and found his tongue. "Huh! If I do stay, blast yuh, it'll be just to make shore there is some brains in the outfit!"

"Thanks!" laughed Ellen.

"Yuh'll get used to him in time," drawled Bob.

For once Dusty could find no satisfactory insult as a comeback. They gripped hands, the three of them. And as they stood so, rose-colored light crept up behind the jagged backbone of the Buckthorns. A coyote yapped, a calf bawled. It was dawn.

An Old Indian Custom

CUSTOM rather than romance played a big part in the lives of the early Indians in America. Before the coming of the Jesuit priests an Indian buck who desired to discard his spouse merely went to a dance, and while the members of his tribe were sitting around a campfire, threw a crooked stick into the air.

Another Indian who had the same desire would also throw a stick into the air. That constituted a trade and the men exchanged wives.

Grave Tales

GHOULS out West were scalped in the early days. And for some, the penalty of robbing Indian graves was to be burned alive.

Wandering riders, when they passed near tree burial platforms used by Crow Indians and other tribes, would throw a noose over a body and drag it down. Then they would help themselves to the Indian's war bonnet, beaded leggings, his beaded shirt and his beautiful beaded moccasins.

Chief Plenty Coups of the Crow Indians in Montana Territory put a stop to grave robbing, however, and for some time it was dangerous for a white man to be caught with any beads or Indian clothing in his possession.

Three Indian scouts were ordered after two notorious ghouls, Ike Smith and Slack Bowles. The scouts—Long Hair, Long Otter and Rotten Belly—put on their war paint and found the grave-robbers in the vicinity of a tree platform burial ground. The three scouts leaped from their horses and hit the ground on the run. The ghouls were taken into the thick brush near-by and in about an hour the scouts returned with two scalps. It was later rumored that the ghouls were burned alive by the squaws.

Chief Plenty Coups then ordered tree platform burials discontinued and he created an Indian burial ground in Montana—a secret cemetery which has not been discovered, even to this day.

Leather Luck

By L. Lindley Mulkey

Bad luck? There ain't no such thing, Dusty averred the day he broke the mirror. But then things started happening that somehow upset the cowboy's complete self-confidence.

DUSTY O'NEAL, blond young rider for the Lazy D, turned so that the light from the bunkhouse window fell over his left shoulder. Before him, propped upright on the shelf, was a small square mirror, and beside it a thick mug filled with the frothy suds of shaving soap.

"Goin' to make yoreself plumb beautiful, ain't yuh?" inquired Tige McGuire from a bunk across the room.

Dusty carefully tested his straight-edge blade and reached for a razor strop. "Maybe," he returned non-committally. "Got an errand or two in town." He finished his stropping and covered the lower half of a lean face with a generous frosting of suds. And then, as he put the mug back on the shelf, his hand brushed the tobacco can which held the mirror in place. *Crash!* With the agility of chain lightning, the mirror slipped off the shelf to the floor.

"My gosh!" Tige McGuire's freckled face was aghast. "Look what yuh done!"

"Huh! I reckon yo're one o' those folks that believe it's bad luck to break a mirror!" scoffed Dusty, as he stooped to gather up the pieces.

"Bad luck! Say, hombre," Tige stated solemnly, "I wouldn't be in yore shoes for no amount o' money."

"And I wouldn't be anywhere else," assured Dusty. "Say, didn't I win five hundred at the Prineville Rodeo just last week? Ain't I in line for the Lazy D foremanship, as soon as Jim Olson moves onto his homestead next month? Hasn't that sorrel I paid twenty bucks for, two years ago, turned out to be the best cow-pony in all Davis County? Hasn't Jeff Whatson made a standin' offer of two hundred for Ranger any time I want to sell him?"

"Ye-ah," conceded Tige sarcastically. "Reckon all yuh need now to make the boss put a crown on yore head and ask yuh to accept half partnership in the Lazy D, is to bring in that wild stallion he's so hepped about."

"H'mn—I may do that, too," Dusty returned with supreme self-confidence.

"But all the same, a busted lookin'-glass—"

"Superstition! Black cats and broken mirrors!" scoffed Dusty O'Neal. "Old women's tales!"

"But Lady Luck's—"

"Lady Luck! There ain't no such maverick! Or, if there is," Dusty amended gayly, "she's pinned a clover on my Stetson and hung a horseshoe round my neck." And just to prove his point, he reached out a swift hand and snapped a mirror fragment into smaller pieces.

Some two hours later, as Dusty O'Neal loped his sorrel gelding along the winding road toward Prineville, his sense of inner well-being burst forth in whistled melody. Brent Wheeler, boss of the Lazy D, had entrusted him with an errand of utmost importance, namely, the depositing of money received from a cattle sale two days before. Twelve hundred dollars. It was enclosed in an envelope, snugly buttoned inside Dusty's windbreaker. But aside from this demonstration of confidence on the part of his employer, there was still another reason for Dusty O'Neal's belief that life was sweet and the future bright; a reason that he hadn't confided to Tige McGuire back there in the Lazy D bunkhouse. Yet this reason possessed a greater potency than all else to lift his spirits to effervescent heights. It had to do with a pair of blue eyes, shadowed by fringing lashes; and a short uptilted nose with a sprinkling of delectable freckles across its bridge; and a firm little chin below two lips that were altogether adorable. Adorable—no other word so aptly described Irene Blair.

Irene was the daughter of old Sam Blair, owner of the Half Moon layout that joined the Lazy D on the south. Even now, as Dusty topped the summit of a rise, he could look down on the cluster of white buildings that marked Irene's home. For two years he had laid constant siege to Irene's heart, but only during the past two weeks had he outdistanced the numerous other suitors who cluttered up the Blairs' front veranda. Perhaps his winning the riding championship at the Prineville Rodeo had had something to do with Irene's increased favor. Certain it was that when he had danced with her last Tuesday night, she had returned the pressure of his hand and regarded him with a misty promise in the blue depths of her eyes.

The five hundred which had come to him along with the championship title should buy the finest diamond to be found in Prineville. Dusty O'Neal's heart warmed. Once he'd finished the business of depositing Brent Wheeler's money in the bank, he'd go shopping. On his way home tonight he could stop at the Half Moon and slip the ring on Irene's tapering finger. Dusty's thoughts were so wholly pleasant that he was utterly oblivious to the keen wind that swept the rangeland, or the lowering clouds that obscured the October sun.

The small stone building which housed Prineville's financial institution was located at the far end of the main street. Arrived in town, Dusty

made his way there at once, but it was not until he had dismounted and approached the heavy plate-glass door that he noted the drawn curtain and, above it, a placard bearing the inscription: "Bank closed for Columbus Day."

"Columbus! Huh—who'd 'a' thought that hombre'd be so doggoned inconsiderate as to pick out the very day I rode twenty miles to make a deposit!" ejaculated Dusty.

"I reckon he should've consulted yuh first," a cool voice spoke.

The Lazy D rider turned to find a tall, narrow-eyed individual standing behind him. Slope Hudson, it was, a new comer to the country, and one who had crowded Dusty close for the rodeo championship the week before. There was no doubt but that Hudson could ride—even Dusty had been moved to admiration—but there was also something about the man which had aroused Dusty's instant dislike. Perhaps it was because Hudson was almost too handsome in his dark Spanish-type way, or it may have been because his amber eyes had a habit of slipping past another's gaze.

"I'll have to speak to this here Columbus hombre about it," Dusty returned coolly.

"Ye-ah, tell him that when rodeo champs come to banks, they expect the doors to be open and roses strewin' their path," the other rejoined.

For a swift moment Dusty's eyes narrowed. Was the fellow trying to pick a fight? But no doubt Hudson was only smarting under the disappointment of losing the championship. Dusty shrugged and turned back to his horse. A moment later he had mounted and was swinging down the street, with no further thought of the dark-visaged Hudson. As for the deposit he was to have made, there was nothing else to do but take the twelve hundred back to Brent Wheeler.

Though the bank was showing Columbus all due respect, the stores of the town were doing business as usual. For this, the Lazy D rider was grateful. His long trip would not have been in vain, for he could accomplish that bit of shopping upon which he'd set his heart.

It was almost three o'clock when Dusty O'Neal finally left Prineville and turned Ranger into the northward trail.

"H'mn," he muttered, glancing at the position of the sun, "it'll be plumb dark by the time I get home."

Yet the prospect of the long lonely ride could not lessen the glow of satisfaction that warmed the cowboy's heart. By slipping one hand into an inside pocket, he could feel the tiny square box enclosing its sparkling gem. And inside the slender golden band, that held the diamond like a drop of purest crystal, was engraved the name, "Irene." It had been this last detail which had delayed Dusty's start back to the Lazy D, but the added happiness it promised the girl of his heart would more than make up for any inconvenience.

Up a long slope and across a high plateau the sorrel traveled at steady, space-eating gait. The sun was low as they descended to a willow-fringed ford across the Lukimute. From here the trail wound along the banks of the stream, with a low range of hills on the right. The clouds of the morning were now high in the sky, shutting off the sun's last rays and bringing an early darkness. The wind had risen again and lifted the sorrel's mane in a ruff. Dusty reached up and settled the wide Stetson more firmly on his head.

Mile after mile reeled off behind the steady clump of Ranger's hoofs. It was now quite dark. In another quarter-hour they would reach the higher ground of the Lukimute Breaks and perhaps catch a glimpse of the lights on the Half Moon Ranch. With this thought, Dusty's pulses quickened. Irene! From a sheer overflow of happiness he raised his husky baritone in a rangeland love song:

"Sweetheart, when first yore lips I pressed,
My love, dear one, was unexpressed—"

And then, like a dash of icy water, a voice cracked out of the darkness: "Hands up, hombre! I've got yuh covered!"

Looming there in the road ahead was a solitary, masked horseman. Whence he had come, Dusty could not have told, except that one moment the road was clear and the next it wasn't. There was no mistaking the cold threat in that voice; there was nothing to do but reach skyward.

As Dusty's hands raised, he felt his gun jerked from its holster. The hard nose of a forty-five pressed the small of his back. A moment—then a practised hand was running through his pockets.

"H'mn, I reckon I'll find this right interestin'," the hold-up man said softly, drawing out the envelope that held Brent Wheeler's cattle money.

And then Dusty O'Neal stiffened. For the searching hand had found the tiny box that enclosed Irene's ring.

"Ah, a lover true, on romance bent!" chuckled the road man, as if he found something immensely amusing in the idea.

Dusty O'Neal's jaw set grimly. He longed to reach out and thrust the fellow's words back down his throat, but the cold point of the gun still pressed his back.

"All right, that'll do," snapped the highwayman. "I'll leave yore gun in the middle of the trail at the top of the ridge."

Suddenly he was gone, a sharp clatter of hoofs receding in the distance. Darkness closed about Dusty O'Neal. And then all at once there floated back to him from the top of the ridge, a melodious voice, singing mockingly:

"Sweetheart, when first yore lips I pressed,
My love, dear one, was unexpressed—"

As the song died away in the night, Dusty O'Neal still sat his horse. The enormity of the thing which had happened descended upon him crushingly. Brent Wheeler's money—gone! And the diamond that was to have settled things definitely between himself and Irene Blair! He'd have to make up that twelve hundred. But how? The ring had taken practically all his rodeo money, leaving his bank account as lean as a wintered maverick.

All at once there came back to Dusty the scene in the bunkhouse that morning.

"But pshaw!" he muttered. "That busted mirror didn't have anythin' to do with the bank bein' closed. As for the cattle money, Brent can take it out of my pay, so much a month. When Olson moves onto his homestead and I get the foremanship, my wage'll be doubled."

Yet this prospect held little to lighten his spirits. For even with the increased wages it would take a long time to pay back twelve hundred dollars, and that would certainly postpone all plans for his and Irene's marriage.

Dusty touched Ranger with spurs. By the time he had reached the top of the ridge and found his gun, a good half-hour had passed. In the shallow valley ahead, the lights of the Half Moon twinkled brightly. But the sight of them failed to thrill Dusty O'Neal. Rather, they served to depress him further, reminding him of what might have been. Yet he couldn't pass them by. The chance of a word with Irene drew him irresistibly.

Ten minutes later he tied Ranger at the Half Moon corral and followed the path that led to the low-built ranchhouse. A light still shone from the living-room window, and from the trilling notes of a piano, Dusty knew that Irene was there. Slowly he mounted the steps. There was no answer to his knock. Apparently Irene hadn't heard above the music. With the privilege of long acquaintance, he opened the door and stepped within.

Suddenly Dusty O'Neal stopped. Before him was a scene that made his heart turn over and settle to the very bottom of his shoes. Irene sat at the piano and, leaning over the instrument

in an attitude of rapt attention, was none other than Slope Hudson. There was no mistaking the ardor of his dark eyes.

With a last trill, the music stopped and Irene swung round on the piano bench.

"Dusty! I didn't hear you come in!" The beauty of the nineteen-year-old girl was like a shining light. Just now, her eyes were dark blue pansies; the lustrous shine of tumbled curls was a golden crown for the perfect oval of her face. It seemed to Dusty O'Neal that his heart must leap out of his breast and go rolling to her feet.

"Excuse me, Irene," he stammered miserably. "I—I didn't know yuh already had company."

"Oh, but I haven't," the girl laughed softly. "You see, Slope—I mean, Mr. Hudson—rides for Dad now. Of course you've met—"

"Ye-ah, sure we've met," Hudson acknowledged. "Last week at the Prineville show, when O'Neal won his crown."

Though the words were civil enough there was a subtle depreciation in the fellow's tone that made Dusty's performance of the week before seem a negligible thing. Hudson was garbed with foppish fastidity in heavy, concha-trimmed chaps and beaded vest. Certainly not workaday clothes—rather those of a cavalier gone courting. The Lazy D rider was suddenly conscious of his own work-stained raiment and battered Stetson.

"We were just trying over some new music that Mr. Hudson got in Prineville today," explained Irene. "Come help us sing, Dusty."

Sing! A slow nausea swept Dusty O'Neal. Somehow, in the face of Hudson's thin smile, he had no wish to recount his recent experience on the road.

"Thanks, Irene, but I—I reckon I'll be ridin' on." He searched desperately for an excuse to explain his presence. "I just stopped to see—tomorrow bein' Sunday—if maybe yuh'd care to ride up the Luckimute a ways."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Dusty." There was real regret in the girl's tone. "But—but I didn't know you'd be off duty at the Lazy D, and Mr. Hudson asked me to go with him."

"H'mn, I see."

Irene, blue eyes troubled, had risen and approached Dusty O'Neal where he stood at the door.

"Dusty, I'm awfully sorry."

"It's all right. I'll be seein' yuh some time next week."

Hastily the Lazy D rider took his leave. Yet, as he mounted his sorrel once more at the corral, there remained with him the memory of Slope Hudson's satisfied smile.

THE following week was one in which a hundred things seemed to go wrong for Dusty O'Neal. Little irritating things, but of sufficient importance not to pass unnoticed in the day's work. A herd of yearlings got lost in the Lukimute Breaks; Ranger received a bad barbed-wire cut; a new lariat was stolen from Dusty's saddle. There was, however, one bright spot in the deepening morass of misfortune. Brent Wheeler had been more than white about the loss of the twelve hundred dollars cattle money. Many a man would have instantly blamed Dusty O'Neal, or suspected him of making away with it himself. But not Wheeler.

"Don't worry," the old rancher had said gruffly. "I never figured on it bein' a bank holiday. And maybe we'll get track of some of that money yet. It was in two five-hundred-dollar notes and four fifties. The fifties can be passed easy enough, but five-hundreds ain't so common. I've got their numbers and I'll notify the bank to watch out for 'em."

Yes, Brent Wheeler had been mighty white, but this very fact made Dusty more determined than ever that the rancher shouldn't lose by the robbery. Once he, Dusty, got the job as

foreman, he'd turn back at least fifty a month on the debt. But whenever he thought of Irene Blair, his heart dropped. When would he again be in a position to buy her another diamond? As the week progressed, it seemed that he must see Irene, tell her of his love and ask her to wait for him.

By Friday afternoon Dusty could wait no longer. He came in early from the range with the intention of cleaning up and riding over to the Half Moon after supper. Taking his shaving kit from the bunkhouse, he made for a near-by clump of cottonwoods, where a spring bubbled into a shallow pool. By leaning above it, the rider's bronzed face was reflected as clearly as in any man-made mirror.

He was perhaps halfway through his ablutions when there came a step from behind.

"Huh—yuh found one that wouldn't break this time, eh?" It was Tige McGuire, a triumphant grin widening his freckled face.

"Break!" scoffed Dusty determinedly. "If yuh think that busted mirror last Saturday had anythin' to do with—"

"H'mn, I don't think it—I know it, hombre. Hasn't bad luck camped on yore trail like a black cat ever since?"

"Those things would have happened to anybody!" defended Dusty, yet deep within his soul was a definite doubt.

"Ye-ah, anybody that had played fast and loose with a broken lookin'-glass like you did," assured Tige helpfully. "Wait till yuh get a load o' my news and yuh'll begin to think so, too."

"News!" Dusty turned a startled countenance.

"Uh-huh! Yuh remember that black range stallion that the boss has been so crazy to get hold of for the last three years?"

"What about him?"

"Well, that there new Half Moon hand, Slope Hudson, has corralled the stallion and figures on makin' a present o' him to Irene Blair."

For a moment there was absolute silence. A white line had appeared about Dusty O'Neal's lips.

"And that ain't all," Tige added impressively.

"No?"

"No. Reckon yuh haven't heard that Jim Olson got a letter today sayin' that his homestead filin' hasn't been allowed."

"His—his filing not allowed!" Dusty O'Neal seemed to brace himself as he took this one on the chin. Jim Olson wouldn't be moving on to his land then, next month! He'd stay right here on the Lazy D and hold down the foreman job that Dusty had been banking on.

"And now maybe yuh'll change yore mind," Tige said softly, "about there bein' a Lady Luck and her havin' a natural antipathy for fellers that go round smashin' mirrors."

And then Tige left him—left him to thoughts that were a bewildered chaos. Without that foremanship, he'd be years paying back the twelve hundred to Brent Wheeler. And all the while there would be Slope Hudson working on the Half Moon—Johnny-on-the-spot to shower Irene with a hundred attentions and gifts. The man was good-looking, handsome enough to turn the head of any girl. Dusty O'Neal struggled with despair. That mirror—Lady Luck—

Suddenly he straightened. Luck be hanged! He could still ride! And there was that rodeo in Cheyenne coming off in ten days. The prizes were always good, and without a doubt he could grab off one of the best. He'd do it. If determination and the capacity to absorb punishment could swing the balance, he'd come back to the Lazy D with enough prize money to clean up that twelve hundred and buy Irene another ring. Brent Wheeler would let him off for a few days, when he knew how much was at stake. Lady Luck! He'd show the spiteful hag where to get off! And such are the leavening qualities of youth and hope, that the Lazy D rider was actually

whistling as he gathered up his shaving kit and turned back to the bunkhouse.

SOME two hours later, as Dusty O'Neal rode through the Half Moon gate, he noticed a group of cowboys gathered at the big peeled-pole corral. Drawing closer, he could make out among the more somber garb of the men, a flash of pink gingham and the glinting bronze of Irene's tumbled curls. Queer, how the last rays of the setting sun seemed to melt them into a glory of gold. Dusty O'Neal's heart began a queer tattoo. Irene's attention was centered, with that of her companions, on the interior of the corral, where a superb black stallion tossed his head and whistled defiance to all comers.

He was a beautiful animal, with long muscles flowing like liquid under satiny skin. A rippling mane and tail of white were in startling contrast to the ebony coat. In every toss of head and lift of hoof, there showed a fine pride that chafed at this unaccustomed restraint. Round and round the corral the stallion circled, snorting, whistling. His every line showed speed and grace; a speed and grace bred only in the wild.

"Hello, Dusty," someone called, as the Lazy D rider approached. "Come get an eyeful of real hoss."

The greetings which met O'Neal were proof of his standing and popularity among these neighboring riders. He shouldered his way among them, exchanging comments on this prize piece of horseflesh.

"Oh, Dusty!" exclaimed Irene, turning to him with shining eyes. "Isn't he just gorgeous?"

"Ought to make a right nice *caballo,*" the rider admitted admiringly.

"I'm dying to ride him. I can hardly wait until he's broke!" Irene trilled.

Dusty looked down into the blue depths of her eyes. Sweet! He noted a little dizzily that she was just heart high.

"Seems like now'd be a right good time to start the operation," drawled a cool voice.

Dusty left off his study of Irene's eyes to meet Slope Hudson's superior grin. The man was standing near one of the tall gate posts, a coil of rope in one hand, his wide sombrero pushed back on his dark head.

"Meanin' what?" asked Dusty quietly.

"Well, there's an old saying about no time like the present—and certainly we couldn't find a more suitable buckaroo to tame that stallion than the champion rider o' the Prineville Rodeo."

The man's words were in the nature of a dare. His lips curled as he regarded the Lazy D rider with narrowed topaz eyes. Yet the others in the group seemed not to sense the antagonism between the two. The idea of Dusty O'Neal being first to ride the stallion caught at their fancy.

"Come on, Dusty, teach the black the feel o' saddle and spur," someone urged.

The others joined in a clamor of insistance. Even Irene added her voice to the rest.

"Oh, Dusty, do ride him!" she begged. "I don't know of anyone I'd rather trust him to than you."

It was then Dusty capitulated. A moment later he was entering the corral, saddle under arm, while Slope Hudson and another Half Moon rider cast their ropes and snubbed the stallion fast. The blindfold came next, with the black fighting frenziedly. Hudson held the stallion's ears as Dusty adjusted his saddle and drew up the cinch. The watchers about the gate had found seats along the top rail of the corral fence. Irene, lovely as a rangeland dawn in her pink gingham, watched every move of horse and man.

There was a breathless silence as Dusty slipped his left foot into the near stirrup. He was in the saddle, his right foot reaching for the other stirrup. And then, whether by acci-

dent or intent, Hudson loosed the blindfold from the black's eyes and let go his ears.

With a lunge the stallion shot upward. The free stirrup swung violently away from Dusty's reaching foot. There was no chance to regain it. Pitching like a hurricane, the stallion crashed against the corral fence. O'Neal, poorly seated and with one foot out of stirrup, was flung violently sideward. There flashed an excruciating pain in his right leg, caught between horse and fence. The stallion screamed with rage and twisted upward. The next instant, Dusty O'Neal left the saddle and spread-eagled on the ground. Ropes shot out to hold the stallion from the prostrate man. Pandemonium—dust. But the Lazy D rider knew nothing of it all. A blanketing darkness had descended over him.

It was some hours later that O'Neal awoke to consciousness in the Lazy D ranch house, where Mrs. Wheeler had insisted he be installed when a group of Half Moon riders brought him home.

"A bad fracture of the right leg," the Prineville doctor pronounced with professional brevity. "It means bed for ten days, then crutches for another two weeks."

"But, Doc!" pleaded Dusty frantically. "I'm due to ride at Cheyenne a week from Thursday!"

"Huh, there'll be no hosses in yore life for two months at least," the other returned definitely. "Take care of that leg or yuh'll be a cripple for life."

With that he turned out the door, leaving Dusty O'Neal to the company of his thoughts. And such company! Mirrors—broken mirrors! Not to be able to ride—not even the chance to work for another three or four weeks! He'd have to sell Ranger. Jeff Whatson's offer of two hundred still held good. Yet to part with the horse he had raised from a colt, would be like parting from a brother.

However, all the worry of the debt he owed could not bring the despair that Dusty experienced when he thought of Irene Blair. The days dragged endlessly, days in which Slope Hudson would be making the most of his time with the girl. A black rage gnawed at Dusty O'Neal. Deep in his heart he was convinced that Hudson had deliberately released that stallion too soon, on the chance of catching the rider off balance.

True, Irene came to see the injured man. But Dusty wondered if it were not merely a duty call. She was as vividly beautiful as a range pheasant, in bright red blouse and beret, with short doeskin skirt revealing the slender straightness of her form.

Mrs. Wheeler, a stickler for convention, stayed in the room with the young people. A painful silence fell between them, broken only by the most commonplace remarks. Yet, when Irene departed, it was as if the sun had suddenly passed behind a cloud. Dusty spent the following days chafing at his inability to walk. Inaction, to him, marked the ultimate of torture.

It was near the end of October when he was finally allowed up on crutches and another week more before the doctor consented to his mounting Ranger and riding at a slow gait about the ranch.

"Reckon yuh'll be spry enough to take in the dance next Friday night," encouraged Tige McGuire.

"Dance—why—"

"Yuh ain't forgot the celebration that's slated for Friday night at the schoolhouse, have yuh?"

No, Dusty hadn't forgotten the dance that was held every year in celebration of the finish of round-up. But since he was unable to dance he was certainly in no position to ask Irene Blair to go. Of course Slope Hudson had long since spoken for the honor and would no doubt prove to be as good at social graces as he was at other things.

Yet, as the night of the dance approached, the white frame schoolhouse

drew Dusty like a lodestone. He'd have to go, if only to look on and torture himself with the sight of Irene held close in Slope Hudson's arms. During the long, bed-ridden days he had come to the definite conclusion that he had lost her. He would take this one last chance to tell her goodby. At the dance too, he could see Jeff Whatson about that two hundred for Ranger. After that he'd go away. Somewhere along the rodeo circuit he could win enough to send Wheeler the balance of the debt.

NEVER had Irene Blair been more beautiful than when she entered the door of the schoolhouse with Slope Hudson. She was wearing a dress of larkspur blue, with her golden hair piled high on small proud head. Her eyes were dark as purple stars in the lovely oval of her face; lips and cheeks vied in carmen beauty. Dusty O'Neal, seated in an inconspicuous place near the wall, gulped. It seemed as if each rhythmic tap of Irene's tiny, high-heeled slippers must bruise his heart anew.

Slope Hudson played the lover well, bending his dark head above the girl's golden one and murmuring words for her ears alone. Dusty, watching the two, felt his heart grow sick. Could it be possible that in a few short weeks so much of ill fortune had befallen one person? That broken mirror—he had succumbed at last to a belief in its power. The persistence with which bad luck had dogged his steps could have no other explanation. Everything was lost. Brent Wheeler's money—that diamond ring—the Lazy D foremanship. And on top of all that—the coming of Slope Hudson to the Half Moon—that fall from the black stallion—the forced sale of Ranger—and now the certain loss of Irene herself.

As Dusty watched the girl smiling up into Slope Hudson's face, he knew utter defeat. If it had only been something tangible, something he could have reached out and throttled with his bare hands! But luck—bad luck! It was like fighting a ghost, a wraith that fluttered and jeered and danced always beyond reach.

Well, thought Dusty O'Neal, it was high time he managed that last farewell with Irene. Then he'd close the deal with Jeff Whatson on Ranger.

The slow waltz came to an end. The dancers separated toward the wall seats. Dusty arose from his place near a window, having lost sight of Irene in the crowd. Just then, Tige McGuire strolled past, a pretty dark-haired girl at his side.

"Know where I'll find Irene?" Dusty detained the two.

"I saw her goin' outside a moment ago," Tige's companion offered. "She said somethin' about lookin' after her horse."

Dusty turned and, limping slightly, made his way toward the door. The night sky was filled with a glitter of stars; yet there was no moon and the big, fenced school yard was sheathed in darkness. The music had not yet started for the next dance, and as Dusty walked slowly along the line of saddled horses at the hitch-rack in search of Irene Blair's gray gelding, a brooding stillness seemed to pervade the night.

And then all at once the silence was broken by a voice—a vibrant tenor, lifted in a haunting melody:

"Sweetheart, when first yore lips I pressed,
My love, dear one, was unexpressed—"

Dusty O'Neal stiffened. Where had he heard that voice before? Then suddenly it came back to him—the lonely road along Lukimute—a masked rider disappearing over the ridge—the strains of a love song floating back. Only now the voice wasn't mocking, but filled with a throbbing tenderness. It came from a clump of cottonwoods that grew about a spring some fifty yards to the left. Dusty O'Neal hitched his gunbelt to an easier position about lean hips. And then, rounding the clump of cottonwoods, he suddenly

stopped. There, leaning lightly against a rustic bench, stood a dark-clad figure. The man's face was uplifted to the star-studded sky, a second verse of the poignant melody on his lips.

"Start reachin'!" Dusty O'Neal's voice cracked harshly. "I hate to disrupt yore vocalizin', but there's things yuh'll have to explain, Slope Hudson!"

The song broke off. "What—"

"Up with those hands—*pronto!*"

"Why, Dusty O'Neal!" cut in a feminine voice. "Whatever do you mean!"

Dusty hadn't seen Irene Blair there on the other side of Hudson, but there was no turning back now. With a swift hand he reached out and secured Slope Hudson's gun.

"It just occurs to me, you were the only one beside Brent Wheeler who knew I had money to deposit on Columbus day," he said bitterly. "Well, I reckon we'll see if yuh have any o' that twelve hundred left."

Gone was all of Slope Hudson's mocking superiority; a muttered curse burst from his lips.

And then Dusty's searching hand drew from the other's pocket an assortment of objects, among them a small, square box, such as jewelers use, and a long envelope. The box he slipped into his own pocket, then opened the envelope to disclose two five-hundred-dollar notes.

"H'mn—so yuh were smart enough not to try to pass 'em in this locality," Dusty said softly and prodded the other with his gun. "Reckon I'll turn yuh over to that deputy sheriff who's here at the dance, until Brent Wheeler can check the numbers on these bills."

IT was the following Sunday that Dusty rode with Irene Blair along the eastern fork of the Lukimute. A blaze of autumn colors splashed the hills; scarlet sumac and maple, bronze and golden poplar, flaunting their glory before a vagrant breeze.

The trail climbed steeply toward a high bluff above the river, and here Dusty and Irene drew rein. Twin dimples appeared at the corners of Irene's curving lips as she lifted a small left hand to inspect the diamond on her engagement finger.

"Reckon we could be married at Thanksgivin' time?" Dusty spoke softly, reaching over for her hand.

A tender smile lighted the girl's eyes. "But Dusty, dear, that's only a week away!"

"And it seems like a year to me. Besides, there's no reason why we shouldn't be married. Yuh see, Jim Olson got word yesterday sayin' his homestead filin'd been reconsidered, so I'll be the Lazy D foreman soon."

"Dusty, how splendid! And Tige McGuire told me last night that you'd gotten back all but two hundred of Wheeler's money from Slope Hudson."

"Ye-ah, and Brent's goin' to let me make that up by breakin' that there black stallion you sold him. Reckon I can keep Ranger now. But Irene, honey—" Dusty's face was pleading—"yuh haven't said Thanksgivin' yet."

For a moment the girl's violet gaze dreamed on a distant peak. "Thanksgiving then, Dusty, dear," she spoke softly. "When a man's as lucky as you—"

With a swift arm, Dusty reached out and caught her to him, tipping her chin upward so that their lips met. A long moment, then Irene straightened.

"Now you've mussed my hair."

Dusty reached into his windbreaker and drew out a small pocket mirror, holding it so that Irene might see her reflection. "I like it that way," he chuckled. "And yuh'll have to get used to having it rumpled."

"Everythin's turned out so wonderfully," the girl sighed softly. "Though Tige says he never saw anyone make such record time as you have, getting back in the good graces of Lady Luck."

"Luck!" scoffed Dusty O'Neal. "There ain't no such maverick!"

And then, as he leaned over again to draw Irene close, one hand reached inside his windbreaker, just to make sure that new pocket mirror was safe.

A
Serial
Novel

Wind over the Range

By Amos Moore

Part Two

SYNOPSIS

LANCE DELANEY, known as "Devil Delaney," a former Texas Ranger.
GERRY CRAIG, who, with her brother, BOB, owns the Rocking C.
CASE LORIMER, owner of the Slash Cross.
ED LEMOINE, a young Eastern geologist.
TOM COOPER, marshal of Cielo.
BILL GROTON, owner of the town livery stable.
THE GILA KID, a young gunman with whom Lorimer is friendly.

While returning to Cielo, his home town, after an absence of several years, Lance Delaney discovers Ed Lemoine afoot on the desert. Someone, apparently as a joke, has sent the Easterner's horse home, after Lemoine dismounted to look at some rocks. Lance takes the boy into Cielo and learns that the town toughs have been treating him to a great deal of rough horseplay. Lance interferes with some of this, gunwhips the Gila Kid, and tells Lemoine to get ready to ride out to the Delaney spread.

While Lance is at the livery stable, he hears a girl give a cry of warning, and whirls just in time to escape a bullet. He kills the man who, for some mysterious reason, was trying to get him. The girl turns out to be Gerry Craig, his childhood playmate.

Gerry's brother, Bob, one of the men who was bedeviling Lemoine, appears now. He threatens Lance, at whom he is sore because of the scene with the geologist. Lorimer, who has come to the scene of the shooting, finally persuades Bob to be off. Delaney subsequently learns that the Cross Slash owner has a mortgage on the Rocking C.

Then Lance goes to Lemoine's room to see if the boy is ready to leave town, and finds him lying on the floor, murdered.

CHAPTER X

Devil Delaney

TO the day of his own death, Lance Delaney never forgot the stark, grisly horror of that scene. Death—sudden and violent death—was no new thing to him. He had seen it many times; many times

he had barely escaped it himself, and it had left him unmoved.

But this was different. This was a foul and brutal murder, the more abominable because its victim had been unsuspecting and unarmed. Ed Lemoine had not carried a gun; he did not even possess one. The nearest thing to a lethal weapon he had owned was an ordinary pocket knife.

But even if he had, there would have been no chance for him to use it. He had been killed while his back was turned to his assailant; while, never dreaming that he was in any danger, he had been putting his clothes into the leather grip which stood open on the table by which he lay. A little pile of white linen handkerchiefs was clutched in his lifeless hand.

The bullet, which must have been fired from the very spot where Lance now stood, had struck him at the base of the skull, shattering the spine and driving the bones with it as it tore its way out through veins and arteries. Before its force was spent, it had pierced the leather satchel and the clothing already packed in it, and gouged a shallow hole in the wall beside the window, where it rested, glinting dully in the sunlight.

The room was a shambles. There was blood everywhere. In a scarlet jet, it had spouted across the table top, splashed over the floor, against the wall. Drops of it had spattered on the glass window-pane, run down in darkening trickles to the sill. It was still welling slowly from that dreadful, gaping wound in the boy's throat, spreading and widening the bright, terrible pool in which his head and shoulders rested. The air was saturated with its heavy, sharp, sickly-sweet odor.

One of the dead boy's hands, the left, was untouched. It lay out at an angle to the body, just as it had struck when he fell. Lance felt the wrist: pulseless, of course, and limp, but warm as in life. There had been life perhaps five, almost surely no more than ten minutes before in that pitifully thin, sun-blistered wrist. Life, and a high, fine courage that rose above physical weakness in that frail, still body. Life that had been snuffed out with a barbaric savagery almost unbelievable. . . .

Lance touched but one other thing: a rumpled heap of garments and toilet articles on the table beside the open grip. They looked as if they had been pulled out and thrown down, helter-skelter. Ed Lemoine had not thrown them there in his packing, for there was no blood on them, except on those at the bottom of the pile. They were sodden and wet, while those at the top were spotless. The spouting jet of blood had drenched the table top before the clothes were put on it. Evidently, Lemoine's murderer, ransacking his grip for plunder, had dragged out the articles and tossed them down.

Murder—for money? This unspeakable butchery for the sake of the few paltry dollars which the boy might have been carrying with him? But was it? His coat was open, the inner pocket in plain view. From it a brown leather wallet protruded; at the edge of the wallet showed the green of new bank-notes.

Then what? Who? Why? If the killer had not been actuated by greed, why had he killed at all? Out of hate? But who was there to hate a harmless, inoffensive boy such as Ed Lemoine? Quiet, diffident, unassuming, good-humored and sunny of nature, hate was the very last emotion he might have been expected to inspire, even in those who despised him for a dude Easterner.

Revenge? For what? What could he possibly have done in the short time he had been in Cielo that could be seriously considered as a motive for putting him out of the way in such a fashion?

It was none of these, surely. But the questions seemed fairly to shout themselves at Lance Delaney as he stepped back into the corridor and drew the broken door to behind him.

He did not look at the body of the murdered boy again, or at anything else in the room; he had no need to. Every detail was etched ineradicably on his brain as if stamped there with an indelible brand—even down to the red-smeared geologist's hammer on the floor by the table.

Who? Why? There could be only one answer, unless the murderer, in his haste to get away, had overlooked the plump bundle of notes protruding from the end of the wallet. . . .

But how could he have overlooked it? It was in plain sight, that money, and in a pocket, the place where anyone would naturally expect money to be, rather than in a leather grip. No; it wasn't for money. . . .

It was—it must have been—mere vindictive malice that had manifested itself in this senseless cruelty. Malice that was stupid and reckless and blind and hateful, all at once; that turned a horse loose in a country beset with a thousand dangers for a man who wasn't mounted.

Good God! Was that the answer? It couldn't be. And yet—

A series of mental pictures flashed, one after another, through Lance Delaney's mind. The barroom of the Harp and Halo. . . . A grinning, snickering group looking delightedly on while a half-befuddled youth with loose lips and blood-shot eyes propelled Ed Lemoine roughly across the floor, ignoring his protests; kicked his feet from under him when he tried to rise, giggling vacantly at his gallant effort to hide the pain it cost him. . . .

A small brown hand, well formed and dainty as a woman's, sliding surreptitiously toward the butt of a gun. . . .

A street, bright with sunlight, crowded, a-murmur with voices; a lurching figure, blind with drunken rage, pouring forth a flood of vituperation and blasphemy, finally staggering away, still mouthing futile threats and curses, boasting that something would happen; a venomous look darted from under the rim of a sombrero looped with a band of braided silver wire. . . .

A sweat-stained horse, galloping in a cloud of dust past the corner, on its back a rider in frenzied haste, leaning forward in the saddle to spur and lash the tired beast to greater speed; a white-faced, a wild-eyed rider, fleeing frantically—from what?

And, in the background, but always there somewhere, whispering, nudging, urging, a slim, smooth-faced youth with a very small, thin-lipped mouth and pale blue eyes that were hard and cunning and curiously cruel. Always, in the background of all the pictures, those pale eyes; those lips that did not move when words came from them; that small, brown, womanish hand, like a slender, poisonous snake in its swift and deadly dart. . . .

Bob Craig and the Gila Kid—playmates. . . .

Lance Delaney strode in through the gilded swinging doors of the saloon and up to the bar, behind which a lean, stringy, dark-skinned individual with a mop of greasy black hair was indolently slopping glasses into a tin bucket full of filthy water, and wiping them on a towel that was, if possible, even less sanitary.

"Yuh know where the Gila Kid is, barkeep?" Lance asked. Although he purposely kept his voice to a note of casual inquiry, he felt the sudden increase in the tension which he had sensed in the air as soon as the line of men at the bar recognized him. There were perhaps ten or a dozen of them. Some of them had been present earlier in the afternoon, some were recent arrivals; but, with one possible exception, they all seemed to be well known to each other.

The bartender, however, had been on duty all the afternoon; and, unless Lance were greatly mistaken, nobody came into or went out of the Harp and Halo unobserved by his sly, sharp eyes. He was a half-breed Mexican. Like many such human hybrids, he

had inherited the good qualities of neither race and the bad ones of both. With rings in his ears, and a bright-colored sash instead of a once-white apron about his waist, he could have passed almost anywhere as the perfect type of Mexican Border bandit—a type that honest men avoided.

He turned a swarthy, rat-like visage part way around toward Lance, and then turned it back again, splashing another glass into the tin bucket. There could be no doubt that he knew who his interlocutor was, but he took his time about replying. Lance, however, was in no mood to brook delay; every minute that passed gave an added advantage to the murderer of Ed Lemoine. At last indifferently:

"Nope," said the half-breed, and reached for another glass.

"Seen him durin' the past fifteen minutes?" demanded Lance. "Turn around here, you, an' answer up when I speak to yuh!"

"An' who might you be, huh? Think I ain't got nothin' to do but run a free information bureau for every loose waddy sifts in here an' don't buy?" The bartender put down the last glass, tossed the ragged towel under the counter, and yawned. There was insolence in his voice, in every line of the lean body. He had ignored the question—and he hadn't turned around.

"Listen, hombre," Lance said, "I asked yuh if the Gila Kid had been in here durin' the past fifteen minutes. Yuh heard me, didn't yuh? Well, yo're goin' to answer me; *sabe usted?* There's murder been done upstairs, an' I'm—"

"Murder, huh? Well"—the rat-like visage was visible in profile again, a knowing grin imperfectly repressed—"well, then, Mister Curiosity, o' course I ain't seen him!"

Head cocked a little to one side, as if he expected to hear a ripple of applause from the line of customers, the bartender started to walk away toward the back of the room, swaying his wide peon's hips affectedly after the manner of a dance-hall girl.

He had taken but a couple of steps when a long arm shot out, and wiry fingers closed over the back of his shirt collar. One powerful jerk, and the wriggling half-breed had been yanked clear over the bar, banged down on his feet in front of it.

"I want the truth!" said Lance Delaney. Though he had not raised his voice, it cracked like a whip through the suddenly silent room. "An' I want it now! Ed Lemoine's lyin' murdered upstairs, with a bullet in the back of his head—murdered, understand me? Where's the Gila Kid?"

"I—I don't know, mister," wheezed the half-breed. "I—"

A stinging slap from Lance's open palm left a broad red mark on the swarthy-skinned cheek; a second, on the other cheek, followed resoundingly, rocking the barkeep's head from side to side.

"The truth! Don't yuh dare try lyin' to me no more, or I'll ram yore teeth down yore throat. Where's the Gila Kid?"

"Aw, it ain't none of his business, Juan. Tell him to go to hell!" a gruff voice from the crowd advised. "Bully Delaney—showin' off the rough stuff; pickin' on a feller without a gun!"

But if the half-breed had no gun, he had a knife. Only, unfortunately for him, Lance suspected it. Before he could draw it from the sheath that was hidden by his bar apron, the bones of his wrist seemed fairly to crack in the grip of fingers that were like a steel vise. With a yell of pain, he let go of the deadly thing. Lance snatched it and sent it smashing among the row of glasses and bottles on the shelf back of the bar.

"Yuh've got two seconds to tell me where's the Gila Kid!"

"I—I don't know—honest!" the wretch's eyes were goggling, rolling in fear and impotent rage. "I saw—I mean, I—I thought I saw him come through here when— Look, mister!

Ain't that him over there now—by the door? Look!"

Lance looked, but not in the direction indicated, and not until he had slammed the half-breed back against the wooden slab of the bar with a force that drove the breath from the man's lungs and rendered him, for the time being, helpless to do any mischief.

Then he spun swiftly on his heel, and his gun was in his hand. Its long barrel rose and fell with smashing impact on the skull of the man who had called out to the bartender not to answer him. Believing Delaney's attention to be completely occupied with the half-breed, he had sidled away from the bar, silently signaling to his companions his intention of braining the suspecting Lance with a blow from behind.

He did not know his man. Lance Delaney's experience had taught him to suspect everybody, all the time. The friends of a killer such as the Gila Kid could never be counted on to be neutral.

The fellow went down with a cracked skull of his own. Another, who recklessly reached for his Colt, caught an uppercut on the point of his jaw that stretched him senseless in the sawdust. And then there was a forty-five in the sinewy hand that had delivered it, twin muzzles covering the whole group, and the hard, glittering eyes of Devil Delaney gleaming like black ice over them.

"Now, then," he said, "if any other son of a sidewinder wants in, he can have it, just by makin' a move!" His voice was still low and even, but there was a deadly ferocity in it that was an index of the cold fury of rage which filled him.

"Yo're cravin' to see real rough stuff. All right, I'll oblige! I want to know where the Gila Kid is—when he was in this joint last. One of yuh's goin' to tell me—I don't give a damn which one, an' I don't give a damn what happens to him afterwards 'cause he does tell. It won't be a marker to what'll happen to the whole stinkin', double-crossin' bunch of yuh if somebody doesn't—*pronto!* I'm gettin' mighty tired of dirtyin' my gun barrel bendin' it over a lot of lousy heads, I am so, an' I'm goin' to use it the way it was built to be used; understand me? Talk!"

"But—but Delaney," stammered a squat, middle-aged man who was so frightened that his teeth were clicking together as if he had a chill, "we don't know where he is. Gawd's truth, we don't—none of us. He was here—"

"When was he here—how long ago? The truth, blast yuh!"

"I—I'm tellin' the truth. Delaney, I wouldn't try—" He broke off with a terrified scream, unable longer to sustain the look of those fierce, probing eyes, and flung himself backward among his companions, moaning and praying for mercy.

"How long ago was the Gila Kid here?" Lance repeated, and a concerted shiver went through the group as his thumbs, resting on the hammers of his guns, drew them back a little way. "I'm gettin' right impatient for somebody to tell me. If I don't hear the truth before I've counted three, there'll be five-six of yuh'll have more'n a sore head to remember Devil Delaney by. *Talk!*"

It was not a threat; Devil Delaney did not make threats. It was a promise. Not one of the men who faced him in the smoky, ill-lit barroom of the Harp and Halo doubted that he would keep it. Therein lay the secret of his power over men, the respect and awe which he inspired; he had never been known to break his word to friend or foe. If he said that he would fire unless his question were answered before he had counted three, then fire he would. A double stream of flaming lead would pour from the muzzles of those two leveled guns, and those in front of them would be mown down as if with a scythe.

"One," said the low, relentless voice. "An' if any crooked-tongued son of

a she-skunk lies to me, he'll be the first to get it. Just bear that in mind whiles yo're tryin' to shield a murderer. . . . Two. . . ."

Of a sudden the barroom was a perfect babel. Everyone was talking at once, each trying to outshout his fellow, each fearing that silence might be construed as defiance, and that he would be the first.

Half a score against one, and of that half-score not a man but was expert in the use of a sixgun, fast on the draw, quick to get into action. Lance could not possibly have fired more than two or three times before he would have been riddled with bullets.

But—he would have taken perhaps half of his enemies with him. Nobody wanted to be among that half. Nobody tried to draw his gun; nobody moved so much as a finger.

"He was in here—"

"Mebbe ten-fifteen minutes ago—"

"He was here just after yuh left before—"

"He was here right after yuh looked in the door—"

"It was mebbe—"

They shouted the information. They yelled it in a ragged, unintelligible chorus that filled the barroom with a harsh medley of noise. The hell with the Gila Kid! He wasn't here, and Devil Delaney was!

"One at a time 'll do," Lance said. "Now, then, you—"

The door leading to the room at the rear opened wider. It had been on a crack all the time, and now Case Lorimer and another man stepped over the threshold, into the barroom.

CHAPTER XI

Alibi

"IF yuh didn't have such a hell-roarin' reputation, Delaney, yuh could likely get along without turnin' the place into a bowlin' alley —or a butcher shop," Case Lorimer said, the inflection in his voice betokening his disapproval of Lance's drastic methods. "What's the big idea, anyways?"

"The big idea right now is for me to find out where's the Gila Kid," Lance told him shortly. "An' the butcher shop's upstairs, Lorimer, right over that room yuh just come out of. Ed Lemoine's up there—shot dead not more'n ten minutes ago, mebbe less, when his back was turned!"

Lorimer whistled.

"Murder, huh? That's bad! We ain't had a killin' in Cielo since Tom Cooper was appointed marshal—an' now there's two in one day! But what's the Gila Kid got to do with it?"

"That's what I'm aimin' to find out, Lorimer." The covert thrust about the dearth of killings in the town until the day on which he had returned to it was not lost on Lance, and he matched it neatly enough with: "The Kid seems to be kind of a special pet o' yores, judgin' from what yuh said to Bill Groton. Mebbe yuh know what he's been doin' since him an' Bob Craig came up street!"

"Well, I know what he was doin' after I got back from Groton's, all right," Lorimer answered. "Sittin' at the table in the back room, havin' a sociable little glass with me an' Mr. Farrell here. . . . Mr. Farrell, he's buyin' cattle for a big concern over to Top Notch City in Coman. . . . Meet Lance Delaney, Spence; Delaney, my friend, Spence Farrell. Yuh can put them guns away, Delaney; yuh won't need 'em. As I was sayin', if yuh hadn't such a hell-roarin' rep—"

But Lance was wasting no time discussing the pros and cons of his reputation. He merely nodded briefly to Farrell, and cut into Lorimer's speech with another sharp question:

"Know where he was *before* yuh got back from Groton's?"

"If he doesn't, I do," the man who had been introduced as a cattle buyer from Texas spoke up. "Course, I don't want to stick my horn in when I ain't been asked to, but when it comes to a matter o' murder, I reckon it's

any man's duty to tell what he knows. This young Gila Kid feller come up the street with another lad, mebbe five-ten minutes afore Case showed up. I was waitin' for Case, an' Gila set down an' had a drink with me. When Case come in, we had another, an' then pretty soon this other young feller—I don't know him, never seen him afore—walks through in a hurry; wouldn't stop, wouldn't have a drink. Went right on."

"Wait a minute, Mr. Farrell," Lance said. "Yo're sure the Gila Kid came right in from the street? Didn't go nowheres else?"

"Sure's I ever was of anythin' in my life!"

"Yuh could see him from the back room?"

"Sartain I could—him an' this other young feller. I was standin' by the back door, wonderin' whether I'd ought to trot along down street after Case an' find out what the shootin' was about when they come along. Gila was holdin' the other feller up—"

"That was Bob Craig, o' course," Lorimer put in. "Yuh remember I give Gila a hint to fetch him away somewheres an' clean him up before he started home? An' they went off together, Bob tellin' the world what he thought of yuh meanwhiles."

"That's right!" exclaimed Spence Farrell. "All comes back to me, now yuh mention it, Case. The two of 'em stops right outside the back door, where them steps leads up, an' I heard this feller yuh say's Bob Craig blowin' off steam about Delaney—I rec'lect that name, now—an' a lemon, seems to me. I wasn't listenin' in on him much, 'cause I seen he was pretty tight; but he was sure on the war-path, an' wavin' the tomahawk."

"Well, where did they go then?" demanded Lance tensely.

"I told yuh—the Gila Kid comes into the back room an' has a drink with me. The drunk—he's all dirty an' got a cut on his head, so he goes right on up stairs. Gila, he says he's sent him up to sleep it off 'fore he goes home. He ain't fit for his folks to see him in the shape he's in. Then, like I said, pretty soon Case come—"

"Hold up, Spence," interrupted Case Lorimer. His little black eyes were shining with an odd light; he was biting his full, red lower lip in a sort of controlled excitement. "Before yuh go any further, did anybody else go up them stairs whiles yuh was waitin' for me to come back?"

"Nary soul"—promptly. "I was right by the door all the time, an' I couldn't 've missed seein' 'em if they had. Yuh don't think"—with anxious naïveté—"it was the drunk done the murder?"

"Damn me if I know what to think!" Lorimer said explosively. "Do you, Delaney? It don't seem no ways possible he did. Bob Craig's a mighty fine young feller, spite o' havin' one hell of a temper when he's liquored up. He was in just the right way to plug Delaney, here, if he'd got a good chance. But this—what did yuh say his name was, Delaney?—Ed Lemoine? He wouldn't be packin' no grudge against him, now, would he? Who was Lemoine?"

"Easterner, out here for his health," volunteered one of the bar loungers who had been silent listeners to the conversation. "Spent most of his time ridin' round an' punchin' rocks with a hammer. Funny feller. Bob didn't have no use a-tall for him."

Case Lorimer went over to the bar and poured himself out a glass of whiskey. He drank it off quickly, as if he needed it.

"I don't like the way this is shapin' up, Delaney," he said, frowning until his black brows met in a straight line over the bridge of his nose. "Not for a damn, I don't. Gila's got a room upstairs; uses it when he's in town an' ain't ridin' for somebody. Seems as if he might've sent Bob up there to take a snooze an' get sobered up a bit, 'fore he sent him home."

"An' where might the Gila Kid be now?" Lance asked quietly. "Mr. Far-

rell says he saw him an' Bob together at the foot of the stairs. Bob went on up, an' the Gila Kid went into the back room, an' was drinkin' with Mr. Farrell when you got there. Where's he now?"

"That," Lorimer frowned, "I couldn't rightly say. Just a minute or so after Bob went through, he jumped up an'—"

"After Bob went through?" Lance repeated sharply. "Yo're tellin' me Bob went through the back room whiles the three of yuh—"

"Were sittin' at the table, havin' a little drink; yes. Like Spence said, he wouldn't stop. Said he was in a hurry, an'—an'—well, Delaney, he looked to be. Tell yuh the truth, I wasn't payin' much attention to him. I was busy talkin' business to Spence, fixin' up the dee-tails of our deal, an' I just noticed that somebody was comin' down the outside stairs, movin' right lively. Wasn't nothin' unusual about that, didn't seem to me. Well, it was Bob."

"Hear anythin' else—anythin' that sounded like a shot?"

Lorimer thought, rubbing his chin with the heel of his hand in meditative fashion. After a moment he said:

"Well, now yuh mention it, Delaney, I did hear somethin'; wouldn't want to say it sounded to me like a shot, though. More like somebody'd slammed a door hard. If I thought about it a-tall at the time—an' I wouldn't want to say I did—I likely thought Bob had banged the door of Gila's room shut. I knew he was up there."

"Anybody else hear it?" Lance wanted to know.

Apparently, no one else had. But Spence Farrell offered the uninvited and entirely plausible explanation that the report of a gun, muffled by two closed doors, could easily have passed unnoticed with the noises in the street and a crowd in the barroom, talking and laughing among themselves.

"Well, I spoke to Bob," Lorimer went on, "an' he answered somethin' I didn't ketch, an' trotted right on a-past us into the barroom. The boys'll tell yuh; some of 'em must 've seen him."

"Yeah; I did, anyways," corroborated one of the group at the bar, a stocky, gray-moustached man—not the one who had spoken before. "He come outa the back room an' made for the street like all hell was ridin' his tail. I yelled at him what was his big rush, but he never turned around; acted as if he didn't even hear me. He was a sight; looked like he'd been in an awful mix-up—"

"That'll do, Kip!" Case Lorimer snapped the speaker off harshly. His frown had darkened to a scowl. He kept gnawing at his lips as if laboring under some growing emotion. "Nobody asked yuh how Bob looked, did they? Just yuh answer what yo're asked!"

He turned back to Lance, his boldly handsome face stern.

"As I was sayin', Delaney, just about a minute or so after Bob come down them stairs an' went through the back room where we three fellers were, Gila gets up an' says he'll go an' keep an' eye on him—tip Juan off not to serve him no more redeye, 'cause he's had more'n enough a'ready, an' 'll pass out cold.

"I'd just poured Gila a drink an' he had the glass in his hand. He steps into the barroom, an' I heard him ask Juan where the devil Bob was. Then he comes scootin' back to us, cussin' Bob out for an idiot for startin' to ride home all messed up the way he was. He slaps his glass down on the table, an'—"

"'The dang young idiot just can't go home lookin' like that!'—that was exactly what he said," chimed in Spence Farrell helpfully. "'He'll upset his sister, an' make her feel awful bad when she sees him. I'm goin' to fetch him back, an' see can't I make him look someways respectable,' he says. An', with that, he says he'll see us later, puts his glass down on the

table an' ducks for the front door. That's the last I seen of him."

"Last anybody seen of him," volunteered the man called Kip, undeterred by Lorimer's rebuke. "He beat it right out after Bob."

"An' this was just about when?" Lance asked, looking at Kip. Kip was the one person in the barroom whom, he had thought, was not an intimate associate of the band which Groton called the "Saints." He was with them, of course, but he did not appear to be of them.

"Now then, lemme think," Kip said. "I'll get it in order right away, Mr. Delaney. Yuh come to the front door yoreself an' just looked in"—Lance nodded—"mebbe ten minutes ago. No, I wouldn't say it was quite that much, but close to it. Anyways, it was right after Bob Craig lit out, 'cause I'd heard his hoss splittin' the wind down the street, an' I was wonderin' if it was him yuh was lookin' for. Yuh give the place the once-over, an' backed out again, without sayin' a word to nobody 'bout what yuh did want.

"Well, yuh couldn't 've got more'n halfway down to the back, s'posin' yuh walked straight down River Street, before the Gila Kid's at the door over there"—he pointed toward the door leading to the rear room of the saloon—"askin' Juan where's Bob Craig got to. He had a glass in his hand, an' I could see Mr. Farrell an' Mr. Lorimer sittin' by the table behind him. Is that what yuh wanted to know?"

It was not what Lance Delaney wanted to know, but, somehow, it was what he expected to hear. He was absolutely positive that Kip was speaking the truth; more, that in speaking it, the honest and observant, if somewhat dull-wittted man had no idea whatever that he was helping to establish a perfect alibi for the Gila Kid and fastening the murder of Ed Lemoine onto Bob Craig.

According to Spence Farrell, the Gila Kid had not been up to the rooms in the second story at all. Bob had. All the evidence went to show that Bob had appeared in a great hurry, and Lance himself had seen him gallop out of town in frenzied haste. Meanwhile Gila had been quietly sitting in the back room of the saloon drinking. There seemed nothing to connect the Gila Kid with the crime.

Bob had been drunk and ugly. He had made threats, open ones, against Lance himself and, when he presumably did not know he was being overheard, against one "lemon"—Lemoine, of course, although Farrell seemed not to have identified the two names. So far as Lance knew, Bob had no real motive for quarreling with Ed Lemoine; certainly none for such an atrocious murder. But an irresponsible, reckless man, ugly and in a fighting mood, does not need a motive; he can but too readily imagine one.

And the sound "like a door slamming hard," just before he had staggered down the outside stairway! What could that have been but the shot, heard by Lorimer in the back room because the outer door was open, but not in the saloon where there was a good deal of noise?

"Mr. Farrell's been figurin' on buyin' a bunch of my stuff," Lorimer was continuing, with seeming irrelevance. "We was goin' to close the deal this afternoon, an' as I'm a mite short-handed, I'd told the Kid there was a job for him at the Cross Slash, if he wanted it. That's how he come to be with us all the time. He was waitin' to ride on out to the ranch with me when I'd finished doin' the business that fetched me to town."

He looked at Lance as though he expected some comment, got none, and looked down at the floor, shaking his head.

"It—it looks kind o' bad for young Bob, don't it, Delaney?" he said. "O' course, there's more in it than meets the eye. There must've been bad blood between 'em somewheres that nobody knew about. But even so; murder—shootin' the little dude in the back!

I—I just don't seem to be able to believe it of Bob. There's a feller I'd 've given a good many dollars to keep out o' trouble, Delaney. I've banked on him, heavy."

The owner of the Cross Slash sighed gustily.

"I—well, I downright liked that boy," he said. "Still, I don't reckon there's nothin' for us to do now but notify the marshal an' have him send a posse after Bob to ketch him an' fetch him in. Can't let sentiment stand in the way when murder's been done. But Bob Craig! No matter if he was cock-eyed drunk, I—"

But Lance was not waiting to go through the formality of notifying the marshal. That meant more explanations, further delay; and already too much time had passed to waste any more.

He did not pause long enough to hear the end of Case Lorimer's remarks, but wheeled about and hurried into the street.

It took him but a second to tighten Beau's cinch. Then he sprang into the saddle and was off at a headlong gallop down the street, in the direction which Bob Craig had taken a few minutes before.

CHAPTER XII

The Scent of Blood

WITH one statement of Case Lorimer's, at least, Lance found himself in complete agreement; namely that, dark as the outlook was for young Bob Craig, there was more in the terrible affair than met the eye.

That Bob had murdered Ed Lemoine in cold blood was almost certainly a fact, whether he had fired the cowardly shot in an access of drunken rage, or had been slyly inspired to do it, as he had been inspired to bait the Easterner that afternoon. His precipitous flight, too, lent weight to suspicions that were already grounded on a sufficiently firm foundation.

But the Gila Kid had also ridden away, taken the same trail but a couple of minutes afterward! True, the Kid had advanced an excellent excuse for his departure, and had neither looked nor acted as if his conscience were troubling him or as if he feared pursuit. But Lance was of the opinion that the Gila Kid had no conscience to trouble him; and, young as he was, he had long since graduated from a school of viciousness in which, as yet, Bob Craig was only a member of the primary class. He could cut a man's throat and presently, without a qualm, use the same knife to cut the meat for his own dinner.

He was cold-blooded, unscrupulous, calculating, and quite unlikely to center suspicion on himself or put his head in a noose by impulsively taking to his heels in plain sight of a score of witnesses, whether they were friendly to him or not. He would take his time about leaving—and he would have an alibi.

Well, he did have an alibi, apparently; an unshakable alibi. A perfect, air-tight, water-proof, steel-jacketed alibi that nobody but a lunatic or a Texas Ranger would dream of questioning. But Lance Delaney questioned it, for, although he was not a lunatic, he had been a Texas Ranger; and the very perfection of the alibi of the Gila Kid was the thing that had made him skeptical. It was too perfect; too plausible; too exact.

Part of it—the most important part—depended on the unsupported word of the cattle buyer, Spence Farrell. The second part was corroborated by Case Lorimer, as well. The third—that is to say, the part which was of no consequence whatever—could be sworn to by at least a dozen men who had seen him open the door of the rear room of the Harp and Halo, heard him call out to the bartender, Juan, to ask where Bob Craig was. This part mattered only because it dovetailed so beautifully with the other two.

But no one save Lorimer and Far-

rell knew that he had been in the back room when Bob had walked through —or had run through. And not even Lorimer could swear that he had separated from Bob at the bottom of the outside stairway, after they had come up the street together. The Texas cattle buyer's statement was the only foundation for that.

And who was Spence Farrell? A cattle buyer perhaps—but not from Top Notch City, in Coman County, Texas! Lance had but just come from that vicinity, and he knew, either by name or reputation, every dealer and rancher of consequence. And certainly no underling would have been sent such a long distance to purchase a bunch of stock from Case Lorimer.

Having lied in one important particular, it was quite likely that Mr. Farrell had made other, equally important, misrepresentations regarding himself and his business. Lance had good reason for believing that he had, for, although he had never before seen the man, somewhere in the storehouse of his memory was a description which fitted him in every detail.

Racing along the wide, well traveled road that led out of Cielo across the verdant, rolling prairie to the mesquite mesa, Lance cudgeled his brains, trying to bring into clear focus the elusive memory. Where was it that he had had described to him just such a man as Spence Farrell—although not by that name, of course? Where was Farrell well known, and in what particular line of business?

A glib, smooth talker; expansively confidential. A bluff, hail-fellow-well-met manner, designedly boisterous and genial. A curly yellow beard and mustache; curly hair of a slightly darker shade of yellow, very thick, but with a roundish bald spot on the crown, the result of a gunshot wound and seldom noticed because of his habit of keeping his hat on whenever possible. Yellowish-brown eyes, light in color and prominent. One ear larger than the other, and both standing out from his head. Weighing between 170 and 190 pounds, weight well distributed; legs very bowed.

Spence Farrell had no beard or mustache, but these were characteristics which could be altered in five minutes —and undoubtedly had been. The name "Farrell," too, had a reminiscent ring. Lance had heard it somewhere, or something very like it, and in connection with the man whose ears were not mates. Farrell—Farrell—

Ah! He had it now! "Carroll!" That was it; Dutch Carroll; alias Maverick Carroll, alias Curly Carroll, alias Spence Farrell, which might or might not be his true name, and was certainly as good as any of his others. Mr. Spence Farrell, who had ridden out of New Mexico—not Texas—probably for his own good, and assuredly for that of the sovereign State.

Lance Delaney smiled grimly to himself as he recalled Lorimer's statement that Farrell had arranged to meet him at the Harp and Halo for the purpose of concluding a deal to buy some of his cattle. Spence Farrell buy cattle? Hardly, so long as the band of rogues and rascals who acknowledged him as their chief and followed his fortunes from one place to another, were able to cut wire, shoot line riders, and stampede sleek herds under the very noses of their irate and outraged owners!

Spence Farrell was no cattle buyer; he was a cattle rustler—de luxe. No job was too dirty or too difficult for him to handle, providing it assured him and his lawless followers a sufficient profit. No proposition was sufficiently gross for him to consider if payment were guaranteed—and usually handed over—in advance.

And this same Spence Farrell was the man whom Case Lorimer introduced as "my friend," and who had alibied the Gila Kid!

Was it possible that Lorimer was honestly deceived in him? Did the owner of the Cross Slash actually believe that he was dealing with an

honest and reliable cattle buyer from Top Notch City? And was Gila, that conscientious imitator of the callous little killer, Billy the Kid, an agent of Farrell's, sent on ahead to gain Lorimer's confidence and prepare the ground for a subsequent coup?

These questions, and a dozen others in connection with them, whirled through Lance Delaney's mind. But, for the time being, he was destined to come to no conclusion in regard to them, for he had reached a point where the broad wagon road divided, separating into three rough but very distinct trails.

If he kept straight on and did not spare his horse, he would arrive in the course of half an hour or so at his own home ranch, the Double D Bar. The adjacent branch, angling away like the spoke of a wheel, would take him to Case Lorimer's Cross Slash in even less time. The third trail, which left the main road almost at a right angle, led in a nearly straight line to the Rocking C, the home of Bob and Gerry Craig.

Which way had Bob Craig taken?

Of course he might, and very probably he had, fled in this direction without any idea of riding home, but in the hope that possible pursuers would erroneously assume that he was making for his own outfit; and, themselves heading for it direct, would thus give him additional time in which to make a clean getaway. The trails were all marked with hundreds of hoofprints. Those of the horse Bob had ridden would be indistinguishable from the others, while on the mesquite mesa it would be next to impossible to discover any tracks at all, save by some sort of lucky accident.

Panic-stricken though Bob had appeared, no doubt but what he would have taken all these factors into account. He had not, probably, anticipated that he would be followed so quickly; but, at any rate, both he and the Gila Kid had disappeared as though the earth had opened and swallowed them up. There was not the slightest trace anywhere to show which way they had turned, or, indeed, if both had turned the same way? They—

Of a sudden, Beau stopped so abruptly that it was a wonder Lance didn't go sailing out of the saddle over his head. The halt was entirely unexpected, and only his superb horsemanship saved him from measuring his length in the thick dust of the trail.

"That's a sweet-scented caper!" he said wrathfully. "What the devil do yuh mean by it, anyway? Get along, before I learn yuh how a braided rawhide quirt tastes! Get along, yuh fool!"

But Beau would not budge, except backward. He was perfectly willing to turn around and return the way he had come, but forward he would not go. Moreover, he was snorting and trembling all over as if he had been seized with some dreadful fear.

Lance was puzzled. His hearing was not as good as his horse's, but it was good enough to detect the vibrant whirr of a rattlesnake, had one been near enough to frighten Beau. Yet he hadn't heard the slightest unusual sound, nor was there anything in sight in the roadway by which he could account for the beast's strange behavior. Yet Beau continued to sweat and shiver, fretting at his bit, his forefeet firmly planted as if to push himself away from the thing, whatever it was, that had terrified him.

Lance dismounted, looped the reins over a projecting branch, and quickly and cautiously inspected the rocks and the thick brush that bordered both sides of the road. There was nothing.

The road itself, rutted and deep with dust, was trampled by innumerable hoofprints, going and coming and turning into each of the three trails. Certainly there was nothing at all alarming in that dry yellow-gray ribbon, nothing that could—

All at once, Lance's eyes narrowed as he caught sight of a small patch of ground, longer than it was wide, where the hoofmarks were not nearly so

numerous as in other places. The dust there had been recently disturbed—and not by the passage of mounted men or wagons, either. Disturbed and then meticulously smoothed out and ridden over again—by a single horse!

Only the closest inspection would have revealed this fact, for great care had evidently been taken to make the patch appear precisely the same as the rest of the road. It was not a yard from where Beau had stopped so abruptly; and, had he not stopped, Lance would never have noticed the curious circumstance at all.

Now, his curiosity and suspicion fully aroused, the young man took a dried branch which he broke from a tree near-by, and gently stirred the dust over the patch. There was only a thin top layer. Underneath, it was moist and sticky. A lump of it that adhered to the end of the branch wasn't yellow, but a dirty reddish color, and it exhaled a heavy, sharp, sickly-sweet odor that made Beau plunge and snort and tug at the restraining bridle rein.

Lance no longer was puzzled at what had frightened the animal. Beau was well trained and obedient, but instinct was stronger in him than the discipline he had been taught. Under protest, he would have passed a coiled rattlesnake, giving the reptile as wide a berth as possible; the roar of a gun within inches of his ear startled him no more than the firing of a shotgun startles a well broken hunting dog.

His job was to carry his master, when and where that master willed, and he had never shirked it. No matter how weary he might be, he would have gone on and on until, from sheer exhaustion, he dropped in his tracks and died.

But he would not, he could not, cross that patch of smoothly scattered dust in the road from which arose to his nostrils the terrifying, horrible scent of freshly shed blood.

CHAPTER XIII

Shot in the Back

SOMEONE had lain there in the road only a short time before. Someone whose blood, seeping down and absorbed by the thick yellow-gray dust, had not yet had time to dry. Someone who was desperately wounded and who, if the quantity of blood were any true indication, could never have managed to walk or ride away by himself.

And, even supposing that he were able, what had been the object of scattering sand and dirt so carefully over the telltale stain? Why such an elaborate attempt to conceal all traces of it?

Once again, it was the question of who and why; and, once again, no sooner had it come to Lance Delaney than he set himself to try to find the answer.

Find it, he knew that he would, for it would be next door to impossible for any person or persons to remove a wounded or dead man who had lost blood enough to make that great damp patch in the roadway, without leaving a trail. By sheer accident—or, rather, through Beau's infallible instinct—he had discovered the origin of it. It should be comparatively easy to follow it now, by casting about in a widening circle from the starting point.

It was no perfunctory search that Lance made. He knew exactly what to look for, almost, indeed, where to look; and it was not long before his patience was rewarded.

Bright against the dun of a withered oak leaf, a single drop of scarlet showed. Another, wet and shining, glistened on the projection of a rock jutting out from a bank of earth where the trail turned off at right angles to the Rocking C ranch house.

Still another, hardly more than a dark spot and half obliterated beneath the print of a horse's hoof, was a little distance farther up the trail from

the main road. And, a dozen yards farther on, a trailing branch concealed a splash and spatter of red.

Here the chaparral was dense, almost impenetrable, and in the trail itself the ground was stony and hard as flint, retaining no impression of horse's hoof or human boot. But a fresh green leaf danced in the wind on the weathered shale where no green leaf should be; a tough bough had been bent backward until the dark color of its bruised fibers showed under the gray bark; the small stump of a twig was white where its end had been snapped off.

At this point, the angles at which the three branches divided from the main road were such that the trail leading to the Rocking C was separated from that to the Cross Slash by less than an eighth of a mile. And, in the irregular triangle of that space, the apex of which was formed by the junction of all three of the trails, Lance Delaney knew that he would find that which he sought. . . .

He pushed aside the bruised bough and another heavier one behind it; noted a heel-mark imprinted in the earth, faintly; a deeper heel-mark where the earth was softer; followed the now plainly marked way where some heavy object had forced itself through the thick undergrowth.

Crushed and broken scrub and bushes, broken branches, a trail of leaves torn from their stems and not even beginning to curl or dry in the heat, made the task easy. A pile of stones that bore every sign of having been hurriedly thrown together lay among the roots of a great tree. They hadn't fallen so—they had been put there to prevent the buzzards and coyotes from getting at the thing which they covered. Yet they covered it but imperfectly; haste and the certainty that the cairn could not be seen from the road or from any of the trails were probably responsible for that.

A booted and spurred foot was visible between some of the crevices among the stones. The edge of a torn neck handkerchief showed, caught on a root. A limp hand protruded, clotted blood encrusting the palm and fingers.

Working swiftly, Lance dragged away the larger stones of the temporary cairn and tossed the smaller ones hurriedly aside. He recognized the clothes before he had half disinterred the limbs they covered. They were those which, only a little while earlier in the day, he had seen young Bob Craig wearing.

And the body which presently lay at his feet, carelessly flung down like an empty sack, huddled and covered with blood from head to foot, was that of Genevra Craig's reckless and dissolute brother. It was still quite warm, and the face, except for the strains and the insignificant cut on the forehead, was not disfigured. It was the same weak, handsome face, marred by lines of dissipation. As Lance turned the body over, the dead eyes, wide open, seemed to stare up at him with an intent and awful fixity.

There was a round bullet hole in the back just beneath the left shoulder blade. And, more from compulsion of habit than from any doubt that Bob Craig was quite dead, Lance opened the vest and shirt, wet and covered with that sinister dark stain.

From the breast pocket of the former a forty-five bullet and some broken fragments of reddish-brown rock fell out, making a subdued musical tinkling sound as they struck the stones.

There was blood on them, as on everything else. And, by some ghastly coincidence, the bullet in its exit had smashed some of the upper ribs, driving the splintered bones out through the flesh, exactly as Ed Lemoine's shattered spine had been forced through the flesh of his throat, mangling the tissues to a pulp.

It was a hideous, sickening sight; but Lance Delaney was allowing himself no time for indulgence in emotion. The fragments of reddish-brown rock

he replaced in the pocket from which they had dropped; but he held the fatal bullet in his hand for a moment, turning it over and over and scrutinizing it with the most minute attention, perplexity written in every line of his face.

Then perplexity changed to amazement, to incredulity. Tight-lipped, narrow-eyed, he stared, holding the scarred leaden missile up so that the last rays of the setting sun should fall upon it, show every mark on it in minutest detail.

His gray eyes lighted suddenly with understanding. He nodded once or twice to himself and then, stooping, tucked the bullet back whence it had fallen—in the upper vest pocket behind the broken bits of rock that had arrested its momentum.

But the concentration of his attention on the bullet which had, within the past quarter-hour, put an end to the life of young Bob Craig, had not prevented him from exercising his other faculties.

The sound of hoofbeats came to him clearly from the direction of the Cielo road, but they were still quite distant, while a single animal, at full gallop, was heading toward the road from the Rocking C ranch. He heard it stop, opposite the place where he had entered the chaparral, heard the swishing of branches, and a moment later discerned the figure of Gerry Craig hurrying toward him through the brush and undergrowth.

Bob's tragic death must become known to her, of course. But she must not see him as Lance had seen him—that would be a dreadful and unnecessary ordeal to which to subject her. Lance went quickly forward to meet her, hoping to spare her all he could.

But she had already caught a glimpse of the supine body among the tree roots. With a queer, choking little cry, she ran forward and stumbled to her knees beside it.

"Bob!" she gasped out. "Oh, Bob! I was afraid—oh, Bob, speak to me, won't you? It's just that you're hurt—you're not—"

A sob rose in her throat; tears sprang to her eyes. She was so white that Lance thought she was going to faint. Very gently he slipped his arms about her and drew her to her feet, turning so that her back was toward the gruesome figure on the ground.

"It's no use, Gerry," he said. "He's gone. But he didn't suffer, not a bit; he never knew he'd been hit. It's awful for you, seein' him thisaway; I'd hoped to head yuh off till I could fetch somebody an' take him home. But whoever did it—"

"I hope he swings!" the girl got out from between chattering teeth. Her eyes were dry and burning now, but she was shaking like a leaf from head to foot and clinging to Lance like a frightened child. "I hope they hang him to the tallest cottonwood in Cielo—and that I'm there to see it! Bob—my brother—"

She broke down again, sobbing with almost hysterical abandon, her face buried on Lance's shoulder, her bright, wind-ruffled hair brushing his cheek. She had forgotten that, scarcely half an hour before, she had denounced him for a coward and a bully; forgotten that he was "Devil Delaney," whom in her anger she had disdained. She remembered only that he was Lance, the well beloved playfellow of her childhood; Lance, of whom, her denial to the contrary notwithstanding, she had dreamed of many, many times since he had ridden away to make a name for himself in the world.

His arms about her were strong and tender; his voice in her ear was murmuring words of comfort and consolation. In the awful shock of her tragic bereavement, she felt that he was all she had left—the only person whom she could trust or care for. She clung to him in a very passion of grief and loneliness, as if she were afraid that he might leave her to bear the horror alone.

Gradually she grew a little calmer, and, between her sobs, the explanation of her presence on the spot came out.

After she had ridden away from the crowd on River Street, she had stopped at the post office to get the mail, and then started off on the road for home, not hurrying, because she thought that perhaps her brother would overtake her somewhere on the way.

But she had seen nothing of him and had met no one, except a cowboy from the Double D Bar, who had greeted her as they had passed one another. She had left the main road, and was within a few minutes' ride of the Rocking C when a riderless horse, its saddle dripping with blood, had dashed past her. At once, she had recognized the animal which her brother had been riding; and, in alarm lest some misfortune should have befallen him, had turned about and ridden back along the trail toward the forks.

The straightness of the trail had enabled her to see Beau tethered to a tree by the branch. She had, at the same time, noticed that something or someone had forced a passage through the chaparral bordering the trail.

Thinking that Bob's horse might have bolted into a tree and thrown him, and that he might be lying unconscious on the ground, she had dismounted and made her way through the undergrowth—to come upon Lance, with the dead body of her brother.

It was only for a brief space that Gerry Craig gave way to her emotions. There was steel in that lovely, yielding young body that Lance held with so much reverence and tenderness; an iron-willed self-control amazing in a girl who had scarcely attained her twenty-first birthday.

In a very short time her voice had steadied; her eyes had burned themselves dry again. She brushed the tear stains from her cheeks and, very pale but completely mistress of herself, once more turned to look at the shattered corpse of Bob Craig.

"Don't do it, Gerry, dear," Lance begged her. "It'll only upset yuh again, an' it can't do a mite of good. Bob—"

"Bob," she interrupted him quietly, "wasn't worth his salt, Lance. He was lazy and weak, a shirker, a liar, if he thought a lie would get him two-bits—just generally no-account. I know it; I've known it for years. But—I loved him. He was all the folks I had. And maybe I loved him better because of his weakness; because he wasn't any good."

"But lookin' at him now, thisaway—"

"I want to look at him so. I'll remember him the way I liked best to think of him—happy and care free, having a wonderful time, making a game of life; but I want to look at him the way the treacherous devil who shot him in the back left him. He was pretty drunk today. He's been a little drunk most days lately—an average of four or five a week for the past two years. But today, especially, he was a mess. It would have been awfully easy to kill him—it was. No risk at all. Whoever did it is going to pay, Lance—and pay high, no matter if it costs me the last cent I've got in the world!"

Her eyes were like bright blue fire as she looked up into Lance's grave face. Her small, firm, capable hand clasped his arm tightly, her fingers unconsciously digging into it as she went on with a sort of repressed passion:

"If there's one thing on earth I despise from the very bottom of my soul, it's the kind of human varmint who'll take advantage of another human's weakness—wait until he's in a position where he can't defend himself or put up a fight for his life. A fair fight's one thing; I could forgive a man if it was a case of kill or be killed. That's natural; I wouldn't hold it against him.

"But to shoot a drunken boy in the back, when he didn't know what he was doing and hadn't an idea that he needed to watch out for himself! Lance, if I find out who's responsible for Bob's death, I'll put a bullet through the hound myself!"

"Nor I wouldn't blame yuh one bit, Gerry," Lance told her. "But—well, there's certain things yuh mebbe don't under—"

"Don't tell me there were any extenuating circumstances!" she cried. "There couldn't be—not with Bob in the condition he was in today. This is just plain cold-blooded murder, and nothing else. And it was a murder that was planned, too! Lance, you must have gotten here right after Bob was shot. Do you know—have you any idea who did it? Tell me! He was nothing to you, of course, but he was my brother, and I've a right to know the truth!"

"Why, yes, Gerry, I've an idea," Lance answered reluctantly. "But I can't be certain sure—yet. This is goin' to take some mullin' over. Yuh see, there was another young feller—a lad from the East who didn't even pack a gun—was shot just about the same way, down in Cielo this afternoon. Plugged in the back."

"A friend of yours? Somebody you knew, Lance?"

"Well, I didn't know him so awful well, but—yes, he was a friend of mine, an' a mighty nice kid. I was trackin' the killer. That's how I come to be out this way when I found Bob. Lorimer an' them's formin' a posse. They all seemed to think—"

He hesitated. Until the finding of Bob Craig's body, he himself had thought that Ed Lemoine had probably been murdered by Bob Craig in a fit of drunken rage. Now he wasn't so sure that Bob had had anything to do with the killing of Ed at all. But he wanted time to think, and he didn't want to tell Gerry how strongly such evidence as there was had pointed to her brother's guilt. Above all, he wanted to get her away from the scene before the posse, which was very close now, could arrive and make things harder for her than they already were.

Marshal Tom Cooper was blunt and outspoken. He might blurt out his suspicions before her, brother or no brother; and there would probably be others along who would show even less consideration for her feelings than the marshal. Lance said:

"Yuh'd better let me take yuh back to yore hawss now, Gerry, an' start yuh off for home. There's a crowd comin', an' I'd rather yuh wasn't here. What's to be done for Bob, I'll do, yuh can count on that, an' yuh can't help him now by stayin' here. If yuh'll just trust me to look out for everythin' for yuh—"

"Of course I'll trust you, Lance," she interrupted. "But you didn't answer my question. I asked you if you had any idea who had shot Bob, and you—you evaded a direct reply. Please tell me."

"Hi, Delaney!" The hail, coming from the main road, prevented Lance from complying with her request, precluded any sort of explanation. Before he could conduct Gerry back to the Rocking C trail, half a dozen men, headed by the marshal and Case Lorimer, came crashing through the brush.

They stopped when they saw Lance, to whose arm Gerry was still holding tightly. To the young man's infinite amazement, the Gila Kid, cool and composed as was his habit, but lacking a little of his usual jauntiness, was with them. He wore something of the same grim and determined air that characterized the other members of the posse—although just how and where he could have joined it, Lance could not for the moment figure out.

Tom Cooper stepped forward, pulling off his sombrero and bowing awkwardly to Gerry, his glance going to Bob's huddled body.

As Lance had foreseen, he was not exactly tactful.

"Good for you, Delaney!" he said.

"I see yuh got him. We come along fast as we could, soon as I heard what was in the wind; but we couldn't ketch yuh. Yuh had too big a start of us. Put up much of a fight when yuh nabbed him, did he?"

"Got him?" echoed Genevra Craig blankly. "What do you mean? Got whom?"

"Why—sorry, ma'am; I thought Delaney'd have told yuh," the marshal offered clumsy apology. "I mean yore young brother, Bob, o' course. It's hard lines, ma'am; I sure do sympathize with yuh. But—well—fugitive from justice, an' all that. . . . Pity he wouldn't surrender peaceable, Delaney; then yuh wouldn't 've had to plug him. Did yuh get him with yore first shot?"

CHAPTER XIV

"Arrest That Man!"

"NO," Lance answered quietly, "I didn't get him with any shot. He was dead when I got here an' found him—dead an' half buried under a pile of stones. I couldn't 've been more'n five-ten minutes too late, though. I reckon the killer—"

He stopped, all at once aware that the group of men around him were looking at him with expressions of open disbelief. Even Marshal Tom Cooper himself was having some ado to keep from an incredulous grin.

As for Gerry Craig, she had dropped Lance's arm as if the touch of it had scorched her fingers, and had drawn away from him with a sort of shuddering repulsion, as she would have recoiled from a poisonous adder.

"You shot Bob?" she cried. *"You?* And you dared—"

"An' why not, ma'am?" the marshal put in. "After what Bob done to that young Lemoine feller, who hadn't never harmed a fly, an' was just as quiet an' civil-spoken as anybody'd want—"

But Gerry did not even hear Tom Cooper. She challenged Lance fiercely:

"So that was why you were so anxious to get me away, was it? It was you yourself who killed my brother! That was the reason you dodged answering me when I asked you if you knew—"

"Certainly I didn't shoot him, Gerry," Lance told her curtly. "Yuh heard me say so once already, didn't yuh? I—"

"Yes—and I heard him tell you the next time you saw him to come a-smokin'!" she flashed. "I don't know what it's all about—this talk of somebody Lemoine and what Bob did to him. But—"

"Gerry, if yuh'll just cool off an' listen to me for just a minute, I'll explain why I happened to—"

However, Gerry Craig was not listening to anybody. Her face chalk white, her eyes like wild blue flames, she backed away another step, snatching at the thirty-eight in its holster at her hip.

"You lying dog!" her clear voice lashed at him savagely. "You skulking, cowardly cur, you! You heard me say what I'd do when I found out who'd shot Bob, didn't you? Remember it? Well—"

A concerted shout of protest went up from the group, and the marshal made an ineffectual spring toward the girl in an effort to prevent her from carrying out her deadly purpose. But it was Lance Delaney himself who caught her wrist, thrust it downward, and wrenched the gun from her grasp before she could pull the trigger.

He was not particularly gentle about it, either. This was the second time within an hour that she had shown herself ready to believe the worst of him on the flimsiest possible evidence, and he was at the end of his patience. Even in death, it seemed, her worthless brother was still able to make a fool of her. And if she chose to act like one, then she should be treated accordingly.

He took the cartridges from the thirty-eight's chambers, put them into his pocket, and tossed the empty gun on the ground at her feet, leaving her to pick it up or not, as she chose. He said coldly:

"If yuh were a few years younger, Gerry, I'd turn yuh over an' give yuh a good sound spankin' for what ails yuh. An' if yuh weren't a girl, I'd learn yuh that it comes expensive to call Lance Delaney a liar. As it is, all I can do is to tell yuh to get along back home—an' stay there, until yuh've come to yore senses. I've stood"—his gray gaze was quite as unfriendly as her own—"I've stood just about all I'm meanin' to from you this day!"

"Delaney's right, Gerry," Case Lorimer appended, taking the girl's arm and patting it in the possessive way he assumed. "This is awful hard on you. Nobody's denyin' that, an' we're all just as sorry as we can be. But yuh've got no license to go gunnin' for Lance when he done nothin' but his plain duty, an' yuh know it."

"No?" Gerry turned on him furiously. "I reckon anybody else would've done the same? Is that what you're trying to tell me?"

"Anybody else that come up with a killer who was tryin' to make a getaway would've shot him, yes, ma'am," Tom Cooper declared. "Or if he didn't, then he'd ought to have. Now, ma'am—"

"Killer? What do you mean, killer?" demanded the girl. "Bob—"

"Bob had a argument with Delaney, sure; but that ain't it. He went back uptown after yuh'd left him, an' pitched off that little Easterner down to the Harp an' Halo—young Ed Lemoine. Then he made a run for it. The Kid rode after him as far as the Forks, an'—"

"An' thought he'd gone straight on home," supplemented the Gila Kid himself, speaking for the first time. "His hawss was better than mine, an' I didn't reckon on bein' able to ketch up with him, so I went straight on to Mr. Lorimer's place, where he rung up me after 'twas found out that Bob had shot young Lemoine. I come right back, o' course, an' met the posse ridin' out from town."

"Yuh didn't see ary trace of Bob, Gila?" asked Lorimer.

"Nary a trace," the Gila Kid affirmed. "He must've hid out somewheres an' let me pass him not knowin' I only wanted to stop him an' get him cleaned up 'fore he went home, an' thinkin', I reckon, I was after him on account of his mur—of his killin' Lemoine. He couldn't 've shot himself, an' piled rocks over his own body, an' Delaney left town after I did. So—" He stopped, looked at Lorimer, and added: "I hadn't only just got to the Cross Slash when yore phone call come through, Mr. Lorimer, an' I talked to yuh over the wire."

"Yuh see, ma'am," the marshal said, addressing Gerry, "Gila didn't know yore brother'd killed Lemoine. The rest of us, back in town, did. Delaney, who found the dude's body first, took after Bob, an', like I said, he had a perfect right to shoot him when he—"

"In the back?" flamed Gerry fiercely.

"Well, but if there wasn't no other way to stop him—"

"Bob never killed the Easterner, and I don't care who says he did!" the girl cried. "But even if he had done it, for Delaney—"

"We got plenty witnesses to prove he done it, ma'am, an' plenty more who saw him high-tailin' it outa town." Cooper was doing his best to be courteous and considerate, but it was plain that he was irritated by the girl's irrational attitude. "Mr. Lorimer's a good friend of yores"—perhaps he did not mean to put into his words the significance they actually carried—"an' him an' the Gila Kid both thought a lot of Bob; but they're convinced he was guilty.

"An' his hidin' away from Gila looked plenty funny, too; showed he was scared he'd been found out an' was

bein' followed. Delaney come up with him afterwards, an'—I've said this before, ma'am—done right to plug him if he resisted bein' stopped an' taken back to the calaboose. Sure, he was drunk; but murder's murder, ma'am."

There was a general murmur of agreement from the group, through which Lance's voice cut in quiet, level tones:

"I've stated twice that I didn't shoot Bob Craig. So whether I had a right to or not seems kind o' beside the point. If some of Miss Craig's friends"—he looked at Case Lorimer—"would persuade her to go along home now—or somewheres else—we might mebbe get ahead investigatin' this business. We're wastin' time, as it is."

"As it is," Gerry Craig took up the phrase, without looking at him, and fixing her blazing blue eyes on Tom Cooper, "you're the marshal of Cielo, a peace officer, empowered to make arrests, aren't you, sir? If a citizen, with just cause, orders you to do so, you—"

"Nobody has to order me to do my duty, ma'am," Cooper snapped at her. "I've told yuh Delaney was justified in shootin'."

"Will you answer the question I asked you, please?"

"Sure, I'm a peace officer—if it's any news to yuh!"

"Then I order you to arrest that man!" She pointed at Lance. "You've nothing but circumstantial evidence against my brother—not an atom of proof that he shot the Easterner. But he's dead, and I want the man who shot him—in the back—arrested! Now! We'll see whether Cielo's a law-abiding town or not, Mr. Cooper!"

"Now, Gerry," Case Lorimer was beginning; but she shook his hand from her arm, pointed again at Lance, trembling with anger.

"Arrest that man!" she grated, between shut teeth.

(To be continued in the next issue)

Open Season on the Pronghorn

THE pronghorn antelope, fleet-footed animal of the plains, which once roamed in countless thousands over the West and which has been protected by law for the past two decades, will be hunted again this year. Thousands of hunting licenses are being issued, as the antelope have devoured domestic feed on the Western ranges to a considerable extent.

With its fleetness of foot and keen vision, the antelope is well fortified against its natural enemies and against the crude weapons of the savage. It demands the freedom of the great open stretches of the plains country, where it can race unhampered for miles on end.

With the animals being difficult to stalk, the Indians devised the so-called method of "flagging" the antelope. The beasts have a trait of curiosity which leads them to investigate anything strange at close range. So the Indians would wave a red flag or piece of buckskin back and forth on the end of a pole, and the antelope would alternately approach and retreat, meanwhile circling around and gradually drawing nearer until it eventually came within range.

The Americans, with their high-powered rifles, find hunting easier, however. Some modern hunters even employ the airplane in their hunts after the famous pronghorn.

Bitter Water

By Allan Cameron

They say a cowboy who's lost his nerve never comes back. But the old boss of the Slash Seven believed in giving a man a chance—and so did his daughter!

I'M sittin' on the front porch of my Slash Seven ranch house, waitin' for the call to supper, when a white-faced feller comes shovin' through the alkali dust, right up to the railin'.

"You the boss here?" he asks in a husky voice.

"Sometimes I ain't sure," I tell him. "But jest right now they ain't no harm in admittin' the charge. What's on yore mind?" I asks, noticin' his hands is as white as them there swamp lilies my daughter, Carita, is allus settin' in the middle o' the table.

"How's chances for a job?"

"Yo're in the wrong camp, young feller," I says, hasty. "This ain't no dude ranch. Right on down the Cody road there, ten, twelve mile—"

"I've heard of them," he cuts in on me. "I'm not havin' any. Bill Farley told me yuh need a man to put yore ridin' string in shape for the Cody Frontier Days' Celebration."

I should hang Bill's hide on the fence for that, I thinks, takin' a closer squint at the stranger. He's dressed in cowboy duds, an' they ain't new. Also his long legs is some bowed. An' he sure has the jaw an' the chin of a fighter. But them soft, white hands—

"You a ridin' flash?" I asks, gettin' ready to razz him. I hate a blowhard.

His gray eyes meet mine level. Somethin' in 'em, or in the bitter twist

to the kid's mouth, chokes the next words back in my throat. Then all at once his shoulders sag, an' he slumps agin the railin' like as if he's too weak to stand up.

"What's the matter?" I grunts. "Did yuh do a stretch, or get spilled, or jest—"

He shivers. "Spilled is right," he mutters. "Been in the hospital near seven months. Sure takes a helluva lot of a fellow's nerve."

"Say!" I whoops, lowerin' my number tens as a' idee penetrates my thick skull. "Ain't you Clay Beeson, that won the trophy at Cody last summer an' got busted up at Madison Square Garden tryin' to save Pecos Cutter?"

"Yeah, I'm him," he admits, without enthusiasm. "Same Brahma steer that ripped Cutter, got me. I'm through ridin'. Lost m' guts. But I know horses. I'm all right on the ground."

"C'm'on up an' set," I invites. "How come yo're a-foot?"

"Yuh've got it nearly all," he says, floppin' down on the top step. "I'm busted—both ways. There's other jobs I could get, p'rhaps. But I sorta hanker to stick round horses. Bill says yuh've got some of the best. I thought mebbe if I got workin' among 'em, I might forget the tumble enough so's I'd— Aw, hell! I better mosey along 'fore yuh get to thinkin' I'm a cryin' fool. S'long, old-timer!"

He pulls himself up an' takes a couple o' jerky steps down into the alkali.

"Hold on!" I hollers an' then I clamp my jaws shut as Carita swings round the corner o' the house. I could 'a' split a grin at the dazed look in Clay Beeson's eyes, if I wasn't so danged uneasy about what Carita might say. She's pretty as they come, if I do say it, but she's had her own way too long. I don't know how she's goin' to take me addin' this down-an'-outer to the payroll, but I sing out hearty:

"Carita, show this young feller where the bunkhouse is at, an' tell Colt Dwyer I hired him to take care o' the show ponies. He'll start work in the mornin', regular pay. Name's Clay Beeson."

Clay grabs his hat off the instant my voice calls him back to earth. For mebbe two slow heart-beats Carita measures him, from unruly red hair to dusty high boots. She sorta stiffens as I bring out the name. Then she tosses her black curls an' her flashin' blue eyes shift to me.

"Colt doesn't need another man, Dad," she opines. "I'm doin' some ridin'. Anyway, it isn't . . . convalescent's job, polishing off a winning string. If you're set on hiring Clay Beeson, have it out with Colt Dwyer yourself."

I feel plumb foolish as I turn to Clay Beeson ag'in. I wonder if he'll catch on it ain't Dwyer that has me waverin'.

"I told yuh, first off," I says, tryin' to act casual, "that I ain't allus sure who's runnin' the Slash Seven. While we're waitin' for the pot to open, are yuh still minded to set in?"

He's suddenly grinnin' at me, all trace o' bitterness gone. "Sit in?" he repeats. "Yuh couldn't keep me out! Gimme a couple of weeks an' I'll handle the opposition, if it's on two feet. An' I'll not be forgettin' what yuh've—"

"Aw, get goin'," I raps out. "The bunkhouse is down past the cottonwoods. Go dump yore warsack 'fore the Chink yells 'Clum an' get it!' "

As Clay shoves off through the dust I heave a big sigh that has nothin' to do with relief.

THE fact is I ain't jest sure how long I can give Clay or any other horse wrangler a job. My main business is raisin' cow-ponies jest a little better than the best for the rodeo racket. Also I have one o' the few bunches of the nearly extinct longhorns. Big fellers, with high shoulders, scimitar-sharp horns, often with a spread o' six feet, an' all the concentrated deviltry that assures a rodeo audience their money's worth. I sell

to the promoters o' the big-time shows, like Tulsa, Oklahoma; Boston Garden; an', o' course, Madison Square Garden.

My stampin' ground is the June show at Cody. It's big enough to draw contestants an' promoters from all over the continent. An' near enough so I don't have to take a gamble on freightin' the critters a long ways an' then not sellin' enough to pay the railroad company.

But for three years now, I'm losin' money. An' it ain't due to the depression, either. I can't jest figger what's wrong. But I'm forced to plaster a mortgage on the place an' some chattel notes on the critters, to keep goin'. The bank has notified me they won't renew. So I know I'll have to play close to m' vest for the next two months an' then drive in a string that'll compel the boys to buy at double what I've been gettin'. That, or I'm out on the road, lookin' in.

Colt Dwyer doesn't show up for supper. The other rannies seem to take to Clay all right. As they files out Carita comes up behind me an' kisses my bald spot. I know right then she's either goin' to make a touch or razz me ragged about somethin'.

"It would appear," I says to forestall any immediate hold-up, "that yo're real sweet to admit yore mistake. This Clay—"

"Would be a prize entry—if we were running a sanitarium," she sniffs. "Dad, you're a generous old darling, but that doesn't buy salt for the broncs. If this Clay is a wizard with horses, why does he have to come all this way? An' if he's just going to loaf around, we can't afford him. Besides, Colt Dwyer's acting funny as it is. If you put this lily-handed has-been over him, he'll be sore as a saddle gall."

I tell her about Clay's plan to make a comeback.

"He'll never do it!" she exclaims, impatient. "You know they never do, Dad. A cowboy once busted up is through. Anyway, if he's bent on making a comeback, how can he, and stay on the ground? Oh, Dad! How can you be so darned easy?"

There is no answer to that. I may bluff my creditors an' the waddies, most o' the time. I can't put anythin' over on Carita. She knows that a lame dog, canine, equine or human, has me faded, all the way. So I pretend to remember somethin' that needs doin' right *pronto,* an' take a sashay out to the corrals.

It takes Clay only a few days to show he knows some smart tricks in conditionin' horses. Colt Dwyer sulks some, but a lot less than I'm expectin'. Then, all of a sudden, he gets very friendly with Clay. The other rannies are for him almost from the start, an' that boy takes on weight an' tan so fast he fits into the picture 'fore the month's out, like he's allus belonged on the Slash Seven.

But I notice he rides only a safe ol' cow-pony that I had oughta retired five years ago. An' even at that, when I take him over to the Buttes to give m' outlaws an' the longhorns the once over, I see his progress is all on the outside. Slim drives a dozen steers hell-bent past us, an' I see Clay's eyes stickin' out with stark terror. It ain't pretty. No more'n the way he shakes when one o' the outlaws tries to climb the fence that shuts them into the canyon between the Buttes.

Well, I hope the kid don't know I've looked into his in'ards an' found 'em missin'. So all the way back I tell him this 'a' that about raisin' show stock.

"These outlaws are worth more'n the best trained rope horse up there at the home place," I says. "Course, after a pony has got used to the ways o' one big-time contestant, it's different. But where I cash in on 'em, at Cody, it goes thataway."

He's breathin' easier an' beginnin' to get a natural color in his lips. I ramble on:

"Naturally, I don't want 'em handled any more than we can help, but I'd be glad to have yuh keep an' eye

on 'em sometime every day till we start the drive in."

He gives me a wary look.

"They seem all right to me now," he says. "What have yuh in mind, Mister Fitzgerald?"

"Well," I answer, careful, "they looked just as good the last two summers. Them an' the longhorns, too. A prime bunch o' bad actors, full o' pep an' deviltry when we start the trip into Cody. An' when the show opens, half o' the lot has no more fight than a sick nursin' calf, an' the rest sweat an' steam an' play out before the boys has a chance to earn a cheer."

"Where do yuh water on the drive in?"

"Oh, the water is all right," I tell him. "We stop at Peever's the first night, an' the second at Lynn's pool. Next night, late, we make Cody. Five, six other outfits feeds an' waters at the same places. An' they get in all right."

"Keep all yore own stuff in sight every day?"

"No," I admit, wonderin' what he's got crossways in his bean. "The steers has twelve hours or so start, an' the outlaws about half that, allowin' for them bein' ornery. Anyways, it would be hard to manage, 'cause most o' the road the first two days is through narrow, windin' valleys."

I'm goin' to ask what he's got on his mind, but jest then we ride up to the corral an' Colt Dwyer beckons me over to the office.

ONE mornin' 'bout a week later me an' Clay ride over to the Buttes ag'in. One after 'n'other o' the boys is puttin' up a fight to stay on a blue roan that I'm right proud to own. He ain't killed or seriously hurt anybody yet, an' still, not one o' them rannies can sit him for half the ten-second count.

"By gosh! Clay," I explodes, "that's the kind o' outlaw that'll bring home the money."

He doesn't say anythin' an' I look to see if he's heard me. He's grinnin' like a schoolboy at a circus parade.

"Just wait till yuh see a real rider up!" Clay shouts to Slim, as the cowboy on the blue roan does a dive an' lands in a heap agin the fence.

"I'll bet Mex here can stick him five seconds," Colt Dwyer yells, givin' us a dirty look as he passes.

"Save yore money, Colt!" Clay calls after him, laughin'. "Some day I'll get sick of watchin' you rannies eatin' dust, an' then I'll climb on that blue devil myself."

Colt Dwyer hurls a nasty curse over his shoulder.

"Quit braggin' till yuh quit bein' a blankety-blank ground-hog!" he yells.

I have jest time to notice the slow red climb into Clay's cheeks an' the hurt look he flashes toward Dwyer when Carita appears from nowhere an' begins talkin' to the foreman. I'm all set to give Dwyer an all-round good cussin', too.

For a coupla hours after that I'm so busy I forget the clash, an' then Dwyer has disappeared an' I see Carita an' Clay ridin' off together toward the longhorn pasture.

That helps some to ease things in m' mind. I'm gosh-awful fond o' that boy an' I hated to see Carita hard on him like she was at first.

That night, after the cowboys has settled in the bunkhouse, she brings up the mornin' fracas.

"It's a darn shame, Dad," she declares. "Colt Dwyer has no business jibing at Clay. Dwyer doesn't take any dizzy chances himself. And he's not tending to our interests half the time. But all the same, Clay is all washed up, as far as the boys are concerned, unless he does something about it. I tried to make him see it. If he can't get up enough grit to call Colt Dwyer's bluff, the only thing for Clay is to hit the trail. You better talk to him, *pronto!*"

I do some heavy thinkin' after Carita goes out. But it always comes back to where we started that first day. A

busted cowboy may recover his nerve, but I never knowed one that did.

Another thing I'm sure of is that I can't nohow get along without Clay until after the Cody rodeo. I'll have to talk to the boy, put what starch I can in his backbone. As for Colt Dwyer, it won't hurt my feelin's a dang bit to fire him. He's off to town again tonight, an' I miss my guess if he sent anyone out to ride guard on the outlaws an' the rest o' the show stuff, as we allus do the last month.

I ambles over to the bunkhouse.

The boys is havin' so much fun it seems Carita is mebbe wrong about them sourin' on Clay. Slim sees me comin' an' sings out a hearty welcome. But when I ask for Clay they get quiet mighty quick.

"He ain't been here since supper," Slim says, after a minute's hesitation. "I seen him ridin' toward the Buttes just 'fore dark."

The Buttes is only two miles from the house. So I figgers I'll jest ride over an' see is everythin' all right, an' if I meet up with Clay we can have a confab, an' that will be all to the good.

When I get to the fence across the neck o' the canyon between the Buttes there ain't no Clay nor his crowbait in sight. I can't see the outlaws, neither, but that don't bother me none as long as the fence is closed. So I'm beginnin' to think I have my ride jest for exercise.

All at once a horse squeals an' gallopin' hoofs come poundin' up the canyon. I pile off an' over to the fence an' squint through.

The forward rush has stopped an' a horse is whirlin' an' clawin' the air. Then he lets out another squeal an' lurches forward, bunched hoofs hittin' the earth like batterin'-rams.

Clay Beeson is toppin' the roan!

But he's pullin' leather somethin' shameful! Jest when I'm sure the bronc is goin' to pile up agin the fence, the brute whirls an' bolts back, only to swerve ag'in in a crazy, pitchin', buckin', brain-twistin' circle that no man livin' could survive ten seconds.

I'm ready to pile over the fence as the boy hits the ground, but a sound at my back makes me swing round. Carita is there an' she signs to me to hold my gab.

"Come on, Dad," she urges, low an' cautious. "Let's beat it away from here before he sees us!"

I look round ag'in an' the poor son-of-a-gun is scramblin' to his feet, an' we watch him go teeterin' over to his ol' safe pony, climb a-top, an' go chasin' after the roan.

Carita leads me a race till we're in sight o' the house. Then she pulls up an' waits for me.

"Well," I says, "I guess yuh was right. A cowboy once busted bad can't come back. But what I don't see is why he has to pick the worst bucker in the whole state. Now, if he'd worked up by easy stages, mebbe—"

"Oh, Dad! Can't you see that doesn't matter. He tried. An' even when he was piled up, he tried again. I just knew you'd spoil it all, if you got a chance. That's why I tore out there after you. If you say a word to the boys—"

"Mi-gosh! Me tell? I'm for Clay all the way. I ain't goin' to tell he can't sit a jack-rabbit without clawin' leather. But I sure am disappointed!"

By the first o' June I'm beginnin' to plan what to do with my surplus cash after I redeem my paper. For I sure never took such critters in to Cody as I'll take this year.

Clay seems to have righted himself with the boys. Anyways, they're workin' so hard on trainin' the ropers that they've no time left for razzin'.

Even Colt is stickin' to business some better, an' is less sulky. He's jest started a bunch o' the boys puttin' up hay on the lower range.

My special effort is the longhorns. Carita circulates from one bunch to the other, and her sharp eyes miss nothin'.

One mornin' before daylight I ride over to the steers before I think anyone is up but the Chink. I've been sorta

uneasy because I'm hearin' a lotta bawlin' an' bellerin' all night, an' I haven't any confidence in the Mex that's takin' the shift after midnight.

I'm almost on the brutes before I see them, an' jest then my pony sticks his forefeet in a badger hole an' somersaults. When I stop rollin' an' pick myself up I see I'll have to shoot the poor brute. Both legs are broken. I start to limp over nearer the pony an' then things happen so fast I ain't never very clear as to what comes first—my shot, or Carita's scream.

I wheel round as the pony's head drops an' there's one o' the longhorns bearin' down on me, his scimitar-sharp horns tossin'. Behind him the whole two hundred loom up in the mornin' haze, bellerin' an' pawin' up the dirt. I snap up the .45 ag'in but nothin' happens. Then I remember. Yesterday I wasted four shots on rattlers. There's no time to reload now. An' I realize too, my left shoulder is dislocated. Unless Carita's rope goes true or I can side-step like a bull-fighter, I'm done.

Then a horse digs his hoofs into the ground beside me. I'm dragged up across the brute's back like a sack o' grain an' dumped down in safety a minute later. Clay is shakin' like a darky at an Irish wake, whether from fright or from my weight I've no time to figger for cursin' at the agony my twisted knee an' my shoulder are givin' me. Ridin' will be outa the picture for me for months. The three-ring trainin' circus will have to go on without me.

To make matters worse, Carita gets a doctor out from Cody an' he insists on her nursin' me. That makes it necessary to put Slim in charge o' the longhorns. He's a likely enough ranny except for the Saturday-night booze.

Clay works like a perpetual-motion machine, tryin' to bridge Slim's off hours an' keep everythin' about the show horses right up to schedule. But long before they let me hobble out to the porch I know some o' that surplus money has melted away, without crossin' my palm.

ALL June is swelterin' hot. An' that adds to our worries. Some years Lynn's pool ain't too dependable. I put it up to Clay and Colt Dwyer an' we decide to start a coupla days earlier, even though it means buyin' feed in Cody that much longer. Dwyer is ag'in it, but I won't give in.

To make matters worse, the hay land is burnin' up with the hot winds an' I have to send some of the cowboys to help Dwyer's outfit with the cuttin'. That leaves us short-handed for the drive in.

We plan to start Wednesday at daybreak with the ropin' horses. Slim is to get under way with the steers the night before, with a couple or three Mexicans Dwyer hires while I'm laid up. Carita insists on ridin', though I want her to come with me in the buckboard. She elects herself a sorta trail boss an', as usual, has her own way.

Clay, with three o' the ol' hands, is to take in the ropin' horses. An' I'm to trail along in the buckboard. I refuse to ride in the chuck wagon with the Chink drivin' after Carita razzes me an' tells me I'd look as cheerful there as an' Irishman ridin' with the chief mourner at his own funeral.

Jest as we start Carita comes tearin' back, her black curls flyin' an' her eyes flashin' blue fire. Right behind her is Slim, lookin' some the worse for wear.

"What do you think of this, Dad?" she demands, as she wheels in beside me. "Slim says he had only one drink yesterday noon when he turned in to snatch a few hours sleep against the night ride. And when I went over there just now he's still sleeping and the steers are gone. Trail at least fifteen hours old. What do you make of it?"

"I think he's lyin' or he's still drunker than he looks," I says, with a scowl that brings Slim up like he's lookin' into a .45. "But how come you,

Carita, to go over to the pasture this mornin'?"

"I rode out early to see if Colt Dwyer had started with the outlaws, Dad. Before I'd covered two miles I saw where the steers cut in on the trail. The tracks seem so old I think I'll make sure where they come from. Dad, there is more in this than you think. Slim knows something I think he ought to tell you."

"Whatever he knows he can keep till he's sober," I says, jerkin' at the reins o' the buckboard ponies. "I'm goin' to keep Clay in sight. Dwyer couldn't wait for a drunk to come to, an' neither will I."

All the same I'm worried ragged. I keep urgin' the boys to push along faster an' so we make Peever's before three in the afternoon.

The report there has me still guessin'. Colt Dwyer was ag'in an early start, an' yet he has sent both outfits on the road with less than half the rest time we allus allow.

I'm wonderin' if he's run 'em ragged last summer an' the one before that. Both times I'm plannin' to help with the drive, but have to go in to Cody the week before to arrange to get a short loan to provide for feedin' the critters till I can sell some of 'em off. Queer, too, when I think about it now. Dwyer hires new men for both them drives an' lets 'em go as soon as the show is over.

One thing is certain, this year Dwyer is drivin' longer hours an' makin' faster time than any cattle should travel in hot weather. If he keeps it up for three days I may just as well say good-by to the idee o' making money off them steers. They'll have no more snap than a bunch o' broken willows.

Carita is all for pushin' right along without waitin' to make camp. But I make her see reason for once.

We're under way again at daybreak.

The tracks o' the outlaws has blotted out the steer tracks except for here an' there where a critter grabs a bite o' grass. This has me puzzled, too. Dwyer refuses to have anythin' to do with them steers, even when I'm laid up. Now here he's takin' on the extry responsibility when he's plenty trouble on his hands with the broncs.

I'm thinkin' about passin' the word along to stop for a rest an' some chuck when Carita comes tearin' back over a ridge, her horse's shoes strikin' fire from the rocks.

"Dad," she hollers, "they're gone!"

I have to split a grin at her then. "Ain't that why we're all hurryin' hell-bent?" I asks.

"It is no joke, Dad," she declares, solemn. "Oh, if I'd only made you listen to Slim's story yesterday! There isn't a track of either horses or steers beyond this ridge."

"Mebbe the ornery critters got thirsty an' stampeded for water. Shovin' 'em through this heat—"

She cut in with an impatient gesture. "It happened just where and how Slim told me it would. Dad, he must have been given something in that booze. But he wasn't out so bad he couldn't remember Colt Dwyer's orders to the Mexicans. I believe Slim. I've been checking up on Dwyer for weeks. I know he's bought up your notes and the mortgage—"

"Hold hard there," I says. "Even if what yuh say is true, what does Dwyer gain by rustlin' the critters off in this way? It seems plumb crazy to me!"

"Oh, he isn't rustling them. They'll get to Cody all right, but more dead than alive, after gorging themselves on 'gyp' water, over in the gypsum badlands. Clay suspected that was what happened the last two years, but I laughed at him, because that section is twenty miles off our trail. Now, I'm not laughing."

I'm not splittin' any grins myself as I remember a talk I have with Clay, one mornin'.

But I send Carita to pass along the word for a rest an' chuck. An' when we reach the smokes I tell the boys I think the steers has got outa hand an'

I calls for volunteers to do some fast ridin' an' turn 'em back before they soak up any o' the bitter water.

Everybody wants the job, even Clay. I see, with some surprise, that he's ridin' a splendid range horse, sturdy an' fast, but steady as a clock. Still, I leave him out an' pick Slim an' two o' the ol' hands that can shoot straight an' often, an' like it. Jest in case. . . .

Without a word Slim takes the lead. I wonder how much the others know. Nobody raises a question when he starts north where there ain't a track on the bare rock. Cowboys can sure keep their traps shut.

I try to persuade Carita to go on with Clay an' the horses to Lynn's pool. But she shoves off, close behind Slim. An' that decides me. I'm goin' along, too. I'll have to take the darn Chink, 'cause drivin' the buckboard over that granite ridge is a two-handed job. An' my bum shoulder an' knee is achin' like a giant toothache.

We sleep in tarps that night. The boys an' Carita are off before daylight. An hour after sunup the Chink sends the ponies up a steep hill an' we stop for a look round. I get my glasses out. First peep I see somethin' that gives me a prod. Down the other side o' the steep slope an' on the valley floor there's outcroppin's that look like gypsum rock.

We must 'a' been near the steers. I hears plenty bawlin' in the night. God! If the boys don't locate 'em pretty soon it will sure be too late!

All at once I hear a bellow that sends the hair pricklin' up the back o' my head. There ain't a more terrifyin' noise on earth than the bawlin' o' maddened cow critters, crazy mad, stampedin'.

There's a right smart o' shootin' an' then I sees 'em comin'. As I get my glasses in focus I'm sure they're my longhorns, all right. Carita, on her big gray, is razzin' 'em along. But up in front, close below us, gainin' on the racin' steers, are three Mexicans, yellin' their heads off.

The steers begin to swerve around, an' in three minutes, they're headed back.

Then cuttin' across all the roar o' the cattle an' men, a sound gouges the heart outa me. A woman's scream! Carita!

I swing the glass round, but I can't find her. The glass blurs. There's another bunch o' steers comin' . . . men. . . .

Is that another scream? The strummin' in my ears is so loud I can't be sure. Then I see her. She pulls her horse round not ten jumps ahead o' the foremost steer. But God! The others are so close! She'll never make it out to the edge. She's caught between two bunches o' maddened steers. Her horse stumbles . . . she's down . . . no . . . not yet. . . .

I forget my useless leg an' lurch outa the buckboard an' over to the rim. The Chink, chatterin' like a monkey, grabs me as I start down. I take the glass he sticks in my hand an' turn it where he's pointin'.

Straight into that rapidly narrowin' death trap, between the sea o' tossin' horns, a rider tears at insane speed, loop swingin'. The rope goes sailin'. It seems to take minutes to settle over the horns o' the steer that's gainin' on Carita's gray. The gray is down. Carita is on her feet. The rope goes taut. The steer somersaults, his hoofs cuttin' the girl down as he turns in the air. It seems as if rope, horse an' steer an' humans pile up in a heap, just as the stampedin' cattle thunder over them!

I'M hobblin' down the steep slope, slippin' an' cursin', when I become conscious ag'in o' what's happenin' round me. The blasted Chink is tryin' to help me an' bleatin' in his high falsetto:

"Hol' on, Boss! Hol' on. Mlissy Caleta all light. Clay all light. He all a-time top lider!" His voice breaks in a shrill cheer.

All at once I can't take another step

on that bum leg. An' I can't crawl, for my danged shoulder is out ag'in. But I don't care because Carita an' Clay an' Slim somehow have come outa that trap.

Slim takes her up on his pony an' one o' the other boys lets Clay climb on behind him. The steers are millin' round an' bellerin' some, but the madness has gone outa them. Some won't get up ag'in. But I'm not thinkin' o' that.

Slim comes hell-bent for me, cheerin' like he's celebratin' Fourth o' July for the whole state.

The Chink hauls me back to the buckboard.

"Did yuh ever see anythin' like it, Boss?" Slim yells, as he swings Carita gently down beside me. "The doggoned, nerviest thing I ever see! An' to think that a doggoned waddy that's been busted an' thrown out on the dump, has the guts to jump in there an' pull Carita out from under two hundred steers, when we think he's scared to face one!"

It is an hour later, when the Chink has coffee scentin' up the whole atmosphere an' the bacon is beginnin' to sizzle, that I settles my back against a boulder an' lets out a grunt o' sheer contentment. Jest like a miser elbow-deep in coin, I make 'em tell me ag'in how Clay shoots the steer to put an' end to the fight with his horse. Then when the brute drops across Carita's gray an' Clay sees there's no chance to get away before the critters will be all over 'em, he gets the idee to make a barricade o' steer horns. His .45 an' a steady hand do the rest.

"What about Dwyer?" I asks, suddenly rememberin' him.

Carita grins at me impudently. She an' Clay are sittin' on the ground, sorta holdin' hands. "Do you think he's fool enough to be there in person?" she asks. "Colt Dwyer will be waiting in Cody with a perfect alibi. But the Mex Slim shot will give evidence that will be hard to get around, eh, Clay?"

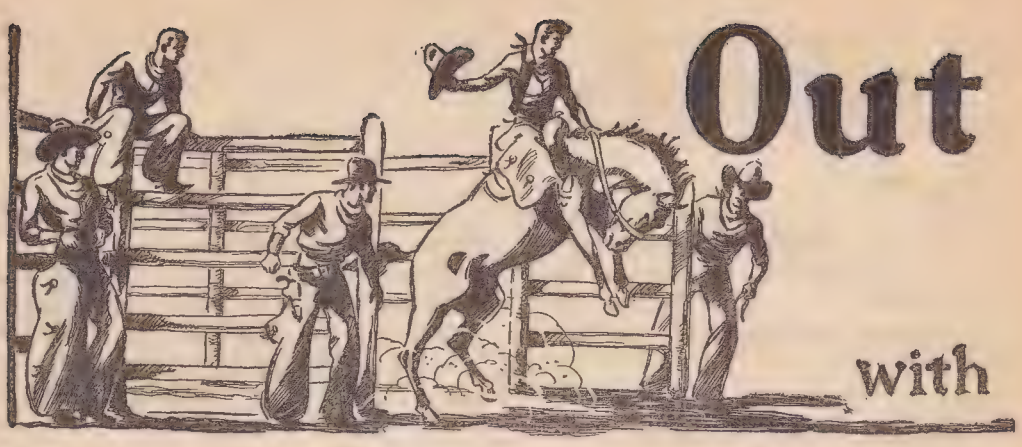
That gives me an idee. "What I can't understand, Clay, is how yuh come to be here a-tall?"

I see the red come up in his face. Carita leans her head against his shoulder, an' draws his arm around her.

"That just goes to show, Dad, that you need a live, young partner in the Slash Seven. Someone with initiative—"

"An' nerve," I cuts in, winkin' at her, but givin' Clay's hand a hearty clasp. "Signed an' sealed before a J. P. Will yuh be wantin' to start the honeymoon before or after the Cody show?"

"Just after," Clay admits, his gray eyes meetin' mine level. "There's a right good purse for ridin' An' I'm hopin' to draw the blue roan."



Out with

Editor's Note:

So many of you have been anxious to know what Tex Sherman looks like that we have decided to print his picture for you. Here he is, folks, on the left. As usual, he will continue to give you the latest rodeo news throughout the country.

Tex, as many of you know, is an old-timer in the rodeo game and an out-and-out Westerner. He was born on a horse and cattle ranch down in Texas, and there's not much about horses and cows that he doesn't know.

He is willing to answer any questions you may have concerning any rodeo or any cowboy or cowgirl contestant. Don't hesitate to write and ask him for information about the rodeo game. Be sure, however, to enclose stamps for reply.

Here they come, "Out of the Chutes" and into the arena, Tex Sherman announcing!

FRED McCARGER, of Salinas, Calif., secretary of the Rodeo Association of America, issued the following statement: Recently the directors of the Rodeo Association of America changed the ruling in regards to the championships for the various states (or provinces).

They have increased the points allowed for these championships from 500 to 1,000, the reason being that the states that had few shows complained that the contestants gravitated to the states having more shows. The change, however, will make it worth while for the contestants to go a long distance to get the extra 1,000 points.

The association also made the bronc-riding, calf-roping, and steer-wrestling the three major events, giving twice as many points in these as in the others.

The reason for the last change was the request of many top-hands who claimed that they had spent many years perfecting themselves and the giving of as many points in the minor events worked to their disadvantage. It was also disclosed that bronc-riding, calf-roping, and steer-wrestling are practically universal at every show, while the other events are scattered.

I can see the cowboy's point of view, and so do the directors of the Rodeo Association. The association has done much to bring the rodeo game to the high standard it is today, and credit should certainly go to Fred McCarger, whose untiring efforts have made the life of the Rodeo Association of America possible.

There are also new rules on the rodeo roping horse. These are intended to curb spectacular exhibitions which have nothing to do with the work of cow horses according to Maxwell McNutt, of San Francisco, who is president of the association.

of the Chutes

Tex Sherman

One of the rules eliminates the spinning horse, switching tail, open mouth, nervous throwing of head, lugging on bridle, or hesitating when being shown. When a horse approaches the roper in order to allow slack in rope it will be classed as a fault. In being shown before the judges the horse is allowed to make half turns, instead of spinning.

The idea of this new ruling is to show the public that that animal is a working cowhorse and not a show animal.

The Rodeo Association just released the present standing of the cowboys following the rodeos at Tucson, Ariz., Wickenburg, Ariz., the Hoot Gibson Rodeo at Saugus, Calif., and the rodeo at Red Bluff, Calif. Here is how they stand:

Smoky Snyder, of Kimberly, B. C., leads with 1,333 points. Jake McClure of Lovington, N. M., is second with 1,037 points. Then come Everette Bowman of Fort Thomas, Ariz., with 800 points; Eddie Woods, of Emmet, Idaho, with 700 points; Frank Schnieder of Hanford, Calif., with 500 points; Tom McBride, with 450 points; Arthur Beloit, of Buckeye, Ariz., with 437 points; and Hugh Clingman, Andy Juaregui, Pete Knight and Chuck Wilson with 400 points each.

At the end of the year the association adds the entire markings of the cowboys. The one having the most points is given the title of champion all-around cowboy.

The Hanford, Calif., Rodeo, which was held last month, was evidently plenty fast and thrilling. Most of the cowboys who did not go across the ocean with the Austin outfit were there.

The stock was plenty tough and one accident marred an almost perfect program. That was when Ervin Collins, riding a tough bronc, came down when a stirrup broke in. The horse stepped on his foot and put him out of the contest.

Lee Rice was manager; Cuff Burroughs was arena director and furnished the stock for the show, which is considered the best bucking stock on the west coast.

The winners are:

Bareback Bronc-Riding
1—Ray Bartram
2—Frank Schnieder
3—Johnnie Schnieder.

Bronc-Riding with Saddle
1—Clay Carr
2—Leonard Ward
3—Johnnie Schnieder.

Wild Steer-Riding
1—Frank Schnieder
2—Fox O'Callahan
3—Pat Woods.

Steer-Wrestling
1—Lloyd Saunders
2—Holloway Grace
3—Clay Carr

Steer-Decorating
1—Johnnie Schnieder
2—Leonard Ward
3—Frank Schnieder

Wild Cow-Milking
Won by Pat Woods.

Brahma steers were used in the steer-riding contest, Brahma calves in the calf-roping and Mexican steers in the bulldogging and roping contests.

The McCamey, Texas, Rodeo sure did go over like wild fire. For a time it looked as if all performances would be a turnaway. The folks down in that neck of the woods sure are rodeo-minded.

E. Pardee, of La Junita, Colo., well known calf-roper, was the arena director, and the program was plenty fast.

This was a four-day show, and here are results, which will undoubtedly interest you:

Calf-Roping (4 calf average)
1—Jake McClure, 66 seconds
2—Howard Westfall, 74 seconds
3—Oscar Schnaubert, 87 seconds.

Team Roping (Total time on 4 steers)
1—Jake McClure and Allan Holder, 82-3
2—Charley Jones and Jake McClure, 105-1
3—E. Pardee and Allan Holder, 107.

Word has just reached me that my old friend, Jack Joyce, passed away June 14, in an Albany, N. Y., hospital. Behind his colorful career are many events that will live forever in the rodeo "Hall of Fame."

Jack was one of the old-time bronc-riders on the Buffalo Bill Wild West show, twenty-five years ago, and was considered one of the best in his day. When riding broncs in those days, a man did not have the regulation committee saddle that is used today at the rodoes, but used an old freak saddle that was plenty tough on the rider.

To get back to my old pal, do you know that it was Jack Joyce who brought his Wild West show to Europe and remained there for twenty years? He was better known in Europe than any Western movie star, and many kings and queens of the various nations knew him and loved him like one of their subjects.

Having scoured Europe for the best horseflesh that money could buy and having brought his purchases to this country, he played vaudeville for a time, but soon returned to Berlin. There he had his winterquarters and broke in new acts. But the feature of which he was mighty proud was his Wild West show. He never produced a circus or show in Europe without his cowboys and cowgirls.

Rudy Rudynoff, horse-trainer with the Hagenbeck Wallace Circus, was telling me that it was through Jack Joyce that he learned the knack of training horses for circuses. When a kid he worked for Jack Joyce for several years with his Wild West show in Germany.

It was a habit of Jack's to be present at the World Series Rodeo, where he visited with many of the old-timers like Mike Hastings, foreman for Col. W. T. Johnson, and talked of the days when a bronc-rider could ride with two reins and did not have to outsmart a judge or bronc to win money.

For the past few years Jack was paralized from the waist down, a shell of his former self. Myself, I could not visit him without an aching heart at the sight of the wasted frame of one of the greatest cowboys of all times, lying in his bed forcing a smile while us old-timers broke down like kids and freely let the heartache and tears relieve us of our depressed feelings.

So Long, Jack. You won't be lonesome on your "Last Round-up" as you will find lots of the old-timers waiting for you just across the line, who will welcome you. There the "judges" will mark you with the high percentage that you justly deserve.

God rest your soul, Old-Timer, and be assured that we shall never forget you.

I predicted several issues ago that

the Royal Humane Society of London would make trouble for Tex Austin, producer of the second annual English rodeo, on a charge of cruelty, and it has. I am sure that I know where the rub comes in at.

A steer caught his leg in a chute gate. Being caught there, it was natural that the steer would fight, which was the cause of the trouble and I did not get the results of the pinch, but will give you all the data as soon as it is released.

Back in 1924 when Tex Austin produced his first annual International Championship Rodeo in London, during the British Empire Exposition, the trouble started with some fanatics sending literature to the Royal Humane Society, stating that there was extreme cruelty to rodeo animals. This was accompanied by photos of branding and the breaking of horses. They made the claim that this method of branding and breaking is unnecessary, and it is only for the sport of cowboys. This, of course, was a rank lie. I have attacked these lies but they have never answered my attacks.

There have been several attempts of radicals to stop the exhibition of Western sports, attempts which always have fallen flat. As long as the public knows that the rodeo game is on the level and that the animals are treated better than the average child, the rodeo will never pass out of existence.

I tell you that such men as Col. W. T. Johnson and Tex Austin are men who have very strict rules pertaining to the care and handling of their animals. They will disqualify and blacklist any employee or contestant from working or competing at any of their rodeos if guilty of cruelty. Not only these men, but the average promoter will see that his stock is well fed and given the best of care.

Adios,

Tex Sherman

Rodeo Schedule

Frontier Days, Cheyenne, Wyo.—July 25-28.
Old Greer Co. Pioneers' Reunion, Mangum, Okla.—July 26-27.
California Rodeo, Salinas, Calif.—July 26-29.
Billings Rodeo, Billings, Mont.—Around July 30.
Ski-Hi Stampede, Monte Vista, Colo.—Aug. 1-3.
Rodeo-Fair, Auburn, Nebr.—Aug. 1-4.
Henry Stampede, Soda Springs, S. D.—Aug. 2-4 or 9-11.
Kiwanis Rodeo, Hinton, Okla.—Aug. 2-4.
Tri-State Rodeo, New Harmony, Ind.—Aug. 2-5.
Dubois Rodeo, Dubois, Wyo.—Aug. 4-5.
North Montana Fair, Great Falls, Mont.—Aug. 6-11.
Nebraska's Big Rodeo, Burwell, Nebr.—Aug. 8-10.
"Days of '76," Deadwood, S. D.—Aug. 9-11.
Iowa's Championship Rodeo, Sidney, Ia.—Aug. 14-17.
Rodeo-Fair, Central City, Nebr.—Aug. 15-18.
Night Herd Rodeo, Thermopolis, Wyo.—Aug. 18-19.
Custer County Rodeo-Fair, Broken Bow, Nebr.—Aug. 21-24.
Kit Carson Round-Up, Trinidad, Colo.—Aug. 22-24.
San Benito County Saddle Horse Show and Rodeo, Hollister, Calif.—Aug. 24-26.
Salem Co. Fair and Rodeo, Woodstown, N. J.—Aug. 30-Sept. 3.
Ellensburg Rodeo, Ellensburg, Wash.—Sept. 1-3.
Lakeview Round-Up, Lakeview, Ore.—Sept. 1-3.
Humboldt County Fair and Rodeo, Winnemucca, Nev.—Sept. 1-3.
McLain Round-Up, Sun City, Kans.—Sept. 1-3.
'49 Show and Round-Up, Fallon, Nev.—Sept. 1-3.
Prairie City Round-Up, Prairie City, Ore.—Sept. 6-8.
Pendleton Round-Up, Pendleton, Ore.—Sept. 13-15.
Mendocino County Fair and Rodeo, Ukiah, Calif.—Sept. 15-16.
Montrose Rodeo, Montrose, Colo.—Sept. 22-23.
Fair-Rodeo, Roswell, N. M.—Second Week in Oct.

◆ ◆ ◆ ◆ The Westerners'

1 S 2 A 3 V 4 V Y 5 P 6 E 7 O 8 N S
9 D 10 T E A 11 B U R R O 12 S
13 E 14 S T A T 15 E 16 L E A V 17 E N
18 F E E L 19 R 20 I P 21 L I M E
22 E R N 23 A R M 24 I 25 C U E
26 R E D 27 S 28 A P 29 A C 30 H E R
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35 C 36 B A N D 37 I T 38 S 39 W A 40 P
41 H 42 E R D 43 V I M 44 E R R
45 E R I 46 E 47 P E R 48 K A T E
49 S A D D 50 L E 51 E 52 R A S E S
T 53 L E A N S 54 A C E S
55 V E N D S 56 A N K L E

Solution to the Puzzle in the First August Number

DEFINITIONS

For the puzzle on the opposite page

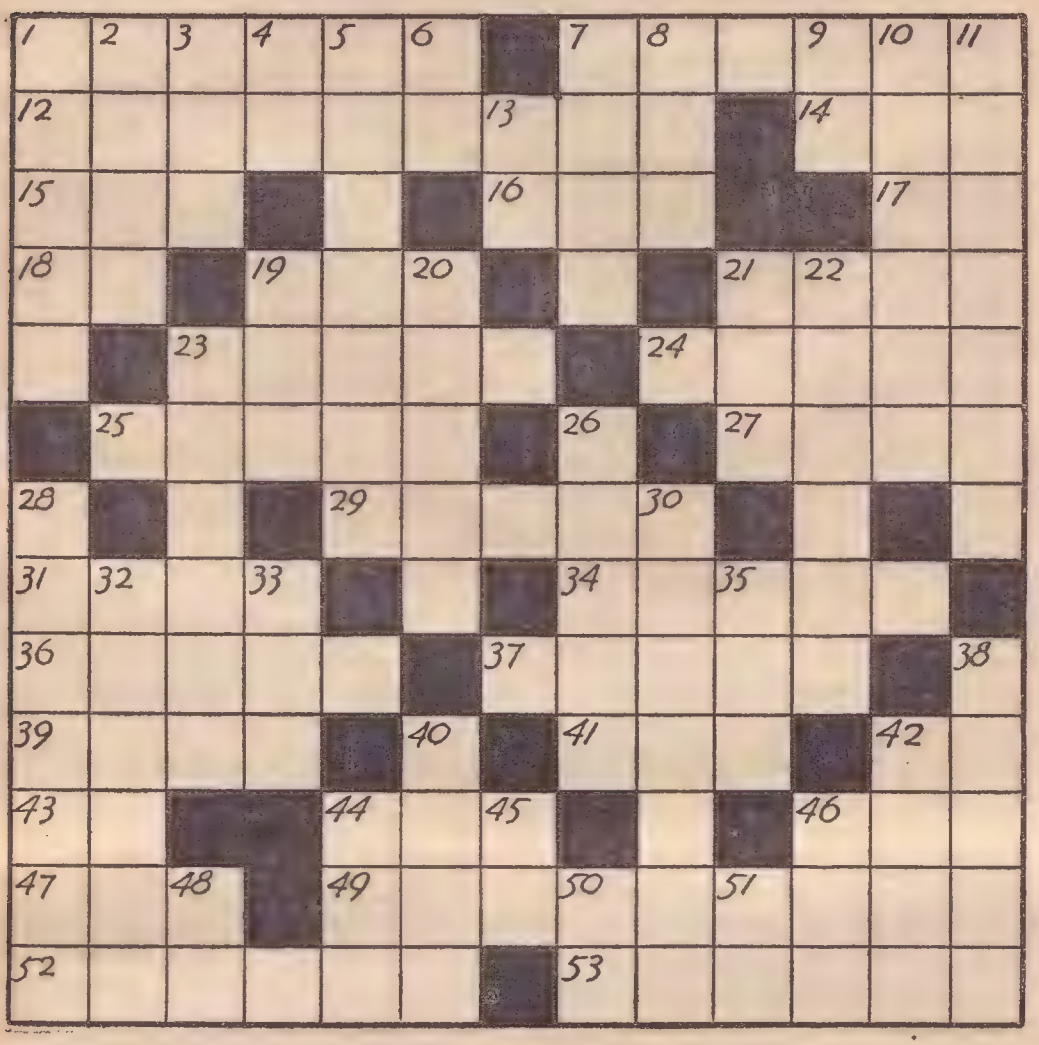
Across

1. To devote oneself continually
7. Agent
12. Western cemeteries for men who died violent deaths
14. Mineral rock
15. To mire down
16. Tree which produces acorns
17. Plural ending
18. Alternative that marks two terms as equivalent
19. Profession of a painter
21. Abnormally large
23. Enumerated; quoted
24. Long, narrow mountain gorge
25. Loaded
27. Place where money is coined
29. Giver
31. Intermittent fever, accompanied with shivering
34. Melts together
36. Pertaining to the nose
37. Struggles for breath
39. Prescribed course of food
41. Pig pen
42. To perform or execute
43. Preposition
44. Exclamation of triumph
46. To decompose
47. Unaccustomed; novel
49. Outlaw; badman
52. One skilled in the practice of some art
53. A slight trembling

Down

1. The Superior of an abbey
2. Portal
3. Canine animal
4. Pronoun
5. Mapped
6. Note of the scale
7. A nation's emblem or banner
8. To request
9. Preposition
10. Western state
11. Considers as an injury or affront
13. Behold
19. Help; assistance
20. Highest male part in music
21. Hindquarter of pork
22. Joins together
23. Cow-pony
26. Article of furniture (Pl.)
28. Cowboy's neckerchief
30. One who steals cattle
32. Covering of cloth for the leg
33. To devour
35. One who examines secretly
38. Engine
40. To sharpen a knife on a stone
42. Extinct bird
44. Short for advertisements
45. Because; since
46. Male sheep
48. Weight (Abbr.)
50. Pint (Abbr.)
51. Note of the scale

Crossword Puzzle . . .

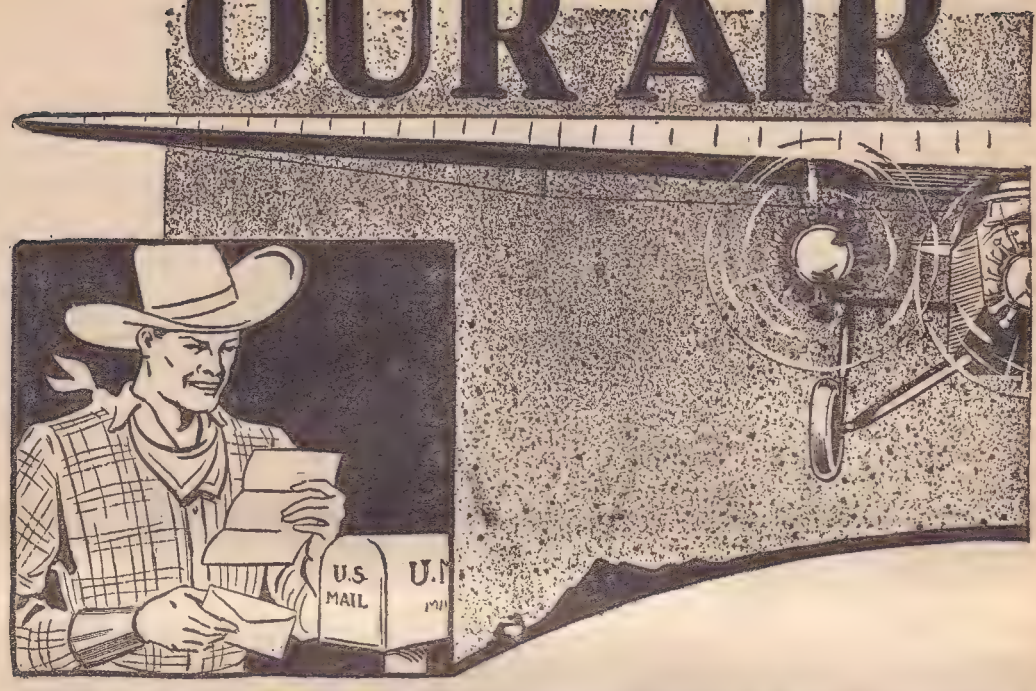


The solution to this puzzle will appear in the First September Number of Ranch Romances.

Let us know whether or not you enjoy these Western crossword puzzles. Do you like to work them out, and do you find them difficult or easy?

Remember that Ranch Romances is your magazine and that our most earnest wish is to give you what you want.

OUR AIR



"OUR AIR MAIL" is running daily among the readers of RANCH ROMANCES throughout the world. We want to help make friends for our readers. We want you to know people who are thousands of miles away, as well as people within a stone's throw of your home town.

You may write directly to anyone whose letter is printed in this department. Remember, however, that all letters must reflect the clean, wholesome spirit of RANCH ROMANCES and must contain nothing objectionable.

Moreover, this department is intended only for those who actually wish correspondents. Therefore each letter must bear the signature of the writer, and anyone fraudulently signing someone's else name will be investigated.

HE LIKES MUSIC

Dear Editor:

I am an ardent reader of your stories. This is my second attempt to crash "Our Air Mail." I am a young man twenty-six years old, five feet eleven inches tall, have brown hair and eyes, and weigh one hundred and seventy-five pounds. I am working on a steamship, traveling between Virginia and the state of Maine. I promise to answer promptly all letters and exchange snaps with those who wish to do so. I am also interested in music and sing second tenor in a quartette. I promise interesting letters to those who write.

Sincerely yours,
EDWARD SMITH.

c/o William H. Machen,
117 West Main St.,
Norfolk, Va.

PATIENTLY WAITING

Dear Editor:

Won't you please make room for a lonely Mississippi boy in "Our Air Mail" section? I have been reading Ranch Romances for around three years now and I think it is the best magazine out.

I am twenty-three, five feet two inches tall, and weigh one hundred and forty-eight pounds. I have blue eyes, black hair, and fair complexion. My hobbies are swimming, the movies and writing. I will exchange snapshots with those who wish, and will answer every letter from either sex. This is about the fourth or fifth time I have written, but I haven't given up the ship, so please don't disappoint me. I will be looking forward to seeing this letter in print.

A would-be pen pal,
MARK WESTHERALL, JR.

Box 735,
Pontotoc, Miss.

SHE'S STILL GOT PEP!

Dear Editor:

Ranch Romances is one of the finest, most restful, clean, and most human magazines on the market. I find it so, at least, after a strenuous day on our daily paper. The headlines on any daily are a nightmare, so I am thankful for the publication of such a book. It is gaining in popularity. May it continue to do so!

Would there be any way of getting in touch with a real Westerner? Are there any such now? I have had chances of obtaining positions in many Western cities, but have been too busy in the East. I could never get started now at the age of sixty-seven, but since I am still working, I feel I should like to know more of that country.

Very sincerely
MRS. MAUDE WOODBURN.

1026 Liberty St.,
Franklin, Penn.

CANADIAN AIRMAN

Dear Editor:

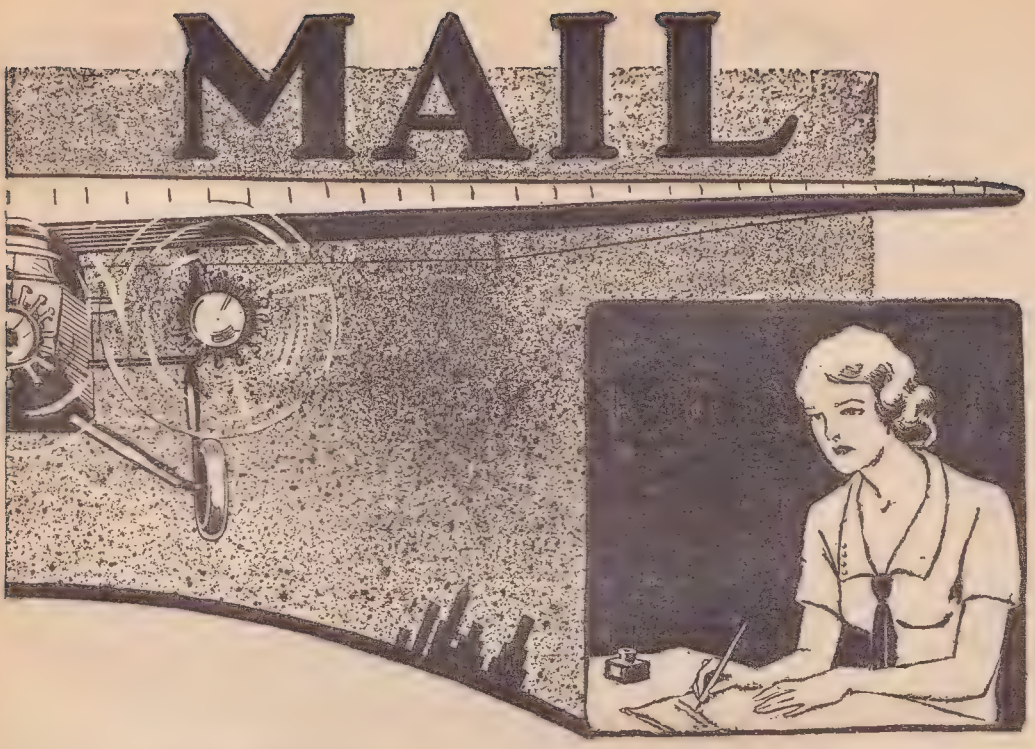
Seeing that letters from Canada are few and far between, how are chances in "Our Air Mail?" I became acquainted with Ranch Romances along the Khyber Pass in India some months ago and am now a steady reader since my return to Canada.

Would any of your readers care to correspond with an airman? I am twenty-seven, six feet tall, homely but happy. I absolutely guarantee an answer to every letter. Let's get going!

Wishing the Double R all of the best, all of the time, I am,

Sincerely yours,
GREGG AUSTIN.

Madoc,
Ontario, Canada.



LONELY WIDOW

Dear Editor:

I am a widow, forty-one years of age. I have had a fair education and a wide experience. At one time or another I have lived in many different places, but recently have not had so many joys. I am in hopes you will publish my letter soon as I am way out here in the West among strangers. My original home was in Michigan. I want letter pals of the male sex.

I am of American birth, and German and English nationality. I am five feet two inches, weigh one hundred and twenty pounds, and have brown hair, worn in a permanent wave, hazel eyes, fair complexion. I have good disposition and am neat and tidy about myself. I am broadminded, dress up to date, am of a very kind, jolly, affectionate nature. I stand well in my own community. I love all clean amusements. I am doing housework at the present time, but I was an assembler on radios at the Crosley Radio Corporation in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1927. I will answer all letters and exchange snaps. Won't someone heed my cry?

Sincerely,
BEATRICE B. WOODRING.

214 N. E. Lombard St.,
Portland, Ore.

A NEW READER

Dear Editor:

This is my first attempt to crash the gates of "Our Air Mail," and I hope that I will be successful. I have just finished reading my first copy of Ranch Romances and find the stories excellent and very interesting.

I am a blue-eyed blonde of sixteen summers. I love all sports, dancing, music and reading. I play the violin and piano. My pet hobby is writing, so I hope that all you Ranch Romances readers will answer my plea. I promise to answer everyone who writes whether from North, South, East or West.

Sincerely yours,
"LAUREY."

Laura Rzasa,
109 Highland Ave.,
Middletown, Conn.

A SENSE OF HUMOR

Dear Editor:

Here are just a few words from a lonely old gal in Missouri who has plenty of time for pen pals.

As for myself I am lazy, conceited; I whistle offkey and I adore onions. I know I have a million other faults but, disregarding them, I suppose you'd still call me human. I've lived through rain, snow, peace, war and the depression for eighteen years now. I have dark brown eyes and curly hair. I am five feet two inches tall and weigh one hundred and eight pounds. Anyone wanting a carload of nonsense, please apply. Come on and sling some ink my way, all you fellows, and we'll laugh at life together.

Anxiously,
"TOOTIE."

Jessie Seabough,
543 Maple Ave.,
Cape Girardeau, Mo.

FREE, WHITE AND TWENTY-ONE!

Dear Editor:

Twice I've been turned away from the very gates of "Our Air Mail," but then perhaps it takes three attemps in order to qualify! Do I get a break this time?

Listen, girls, I'm free, white and twenty-one. I've got brown hair, gray eyes, and am five feet eleven inches tall. I've got a couple of dozen snaps that I'd like to exchange with those who will write to me.

The local bookstand dealer told me that R. R. was his fastest selling magazine. And it's no wonder! I've read it for about four years and I think it's great!

Yours truly,
FRED BRAYKO.

Scobey, Mont.

LONE SHE-WOLF

Dear Editor:

Would you please include my name in "Our Air Mail" columns? This is my third attempt to get my letter accepted.

I am a lone "she-wolf" here in New York, having come from Chicago. I would like to have some pen pals from all over the world—young or old. I collect cooking recipes and stamps. I am a German-Hungarian and am thirty years old. Now don't let my age stop you from writing. Here's hoping I'll hear from both boys and girls.

Wishing Ranch Romances all the success in the world, I am,

Sincerely yours,
KATHERINE LAMBERT.

123 West 93rd St.,
New York City.

OUTDOORS LAD

Dear Editor:

A word about your magazine: I sure think it is the best on the market and I'm not fooling about that either! The stories are swell!

Here's a description of myself: I am just a twenty-three-year-old blond with blue eyes, and light complexion. I weigh about one hundred and thirty-seven pounds and am five feet six inches tall. I am fond of all outdoor sports, such as fishing, hunting, camping and target-shooting with revolver and rifle. Come on then, boys and girls, and get those pens and pencils moving in my direction. I promise to answer every letter I receive.

Yours sincerely,

ERNIE.

Ernest L. E. Hack,
Route No. 3, Box 42,
Perkins St.,
Bristol, Conn.

HIGH-SCHOOL GRADUATE

Dear Editor:

I have been reading Ranch Romances for several years and think it the best magazine I have ever read. I have tried three consecutive times to have you print my plea for pen pals, but no such luck! Please have a heart and let me crash the gates this time.

I am five feet five inches tall, weigh one hundred and twenty pounds and am considered good looking. I am nineteen years old and have graduated from high school. My hobbies are horseback riding (I don't mean hobby-horse, either!), tennis, dancing, swimming, and most everything that young folks like. If you would like to hear of my adventures in the Lone Star State, I should be glad to relate them to you.

Sincerely yours,

"MICKEY."

Marian Rayford,
R.D. No. 3,
Painesville, Ohio.

SHE KNOWS REAL COWBOYS!

Dear Editor:

I have tried for three consecutive years to find pen pals through "Our Air Mail," but haven't succeeded. I intend to keep on trying until I do succeed!

I have been reading Ranch Romances for six years and I can truthfully say that Ranch Romances is my favorite magazine. I always enjoy its good, clean, outdoor stories. There hasn't been a story published that I didn't like.

I spend my summer vacations on a ranch and know a few real cowboys. My favorite sport is horseback riding, but I like anything that is done outdoors. I am seventeen years of age, five feet six inches tall, have brown curly hair and gray eyes. Hoping that my letter will appear in "Our Air Mail," and wishing Ranch Romances the best of luck, I remain

Sincerely yours,

RUTH ESTER MILLER.

3551 Ray St.
San Diego, Calif.

FRENCH CANADIAN GIRL

Dear Editor:

I am wondering if I am lucky enough to have this request printed in your wonderful magazine? I have a great desire to have pen pals, especially from the opposite sex. I am a French girl of twenty-two years. I have dark hair and dark brown eyes, and have a fair complexion. I am five feet four and one-half inches tall and I weigh one hundred and seventeen pounds. I promise to answer all letters addressed to me without delay and will exchange photos, etc.

With best wishes to Ranch Romances, I remain,

A devoted reader,

F. BOULAIS.

Box 58,
St. Eustache,
Quebec, Canada.

THE GREAT-WHITE-WAY GIRLS

Dear Editor:

From the wonder city of the U. S. comes the plea of two Ranch Romances' readers. We are two girls that live in the heart of New York City, not a stone's throw from the "Great White Way." Terry is twenty years old, five feet two inches tall, and weighs one hundred and five pounds. She has reddish-brown hair and brown eyes. Kay (the Mutt part of the Mutt and Jeff team) weighs one hundred forty-six pounds and is five feet nine inches tall. She has dark brown hair and eyes. We are interested in most everything. Terry's mania is dancing and swimming, while Kay goes in for motorcycling. We would be glad to correspond with pen pals from every part of the U. S. A., and all over the world, up to the age of thirty. Why the age limit? Write and find out!

TERRY AND KAY.

c/o Tartaglino,
533 Ninth Ave.,
New York City.

AVIATION IS HIS HOBBY

Dear Editor:

Have you room in your corner for a lonesome boy from down Texas way? I have been a devoted reader of Ranch Romances for a number of years and think it can't be beat. I would love to hear from anyone young or old, so come on, gang. I promise to answer and exchange snaps.

I am almost twenty years old. I am six feet with brown eyes and dark curly hair. I have spent most of my life in the wide open spaces and I love all outdoor sports. I am very much interested in aviation and can tell some interesting things about it.

Wishing your magazine loads of luck, I am

Sincerely yours,

CURLY.

Claude Phillips,
Box 301,
McKinney, Texas.

RIGHT NEXT TO HEAVEN!

Dear Editor:

As this is my first attempt to write your wonderful magazine, I sincerely hope you will find a place in it for me, seeing as I come from the "next place to heaven!" So step on it, everybody, young and old, and I promise to answer every letter and exchange snaps. I am twenty-one years old, five feet ten inches tall, and have dark hair and eyes. I am fond of all sports, especially football, cricket and swimming.

Hoping to hear from everybody who reads your magazine, I am

Sincerely yours,

FRANK MULLAN.

16 Argyle Terrace,
Londonderry,
Ireland.

A POETESS NEEDS PALS

Dear Editor:

It's pen pals I'm in search of,
Please pals, won't you write to me?
My looks aren't much to speak of,
And I'll soon be twenty-three.
My eyes are big and blue,
My hair is reddish brown.
To all of you I'll be true—
Oh, please pals don't turn me down!
I almost forgot to mention
I'm five feet eleven and a half.
I'm longing for your attention,
And certain to make you laugh!
I love to sing and to dance,
Boys and girls, won't you give me a chance?

"SMILES."

Mary Schurb,
R.R. 6, Millville,
Hamilton, Ohio.

HE'S NO QUITTER!

Dear Editor:

If your stories were not so darned good I would have quit buying Ranch Romances four years ago, because so far all my letters for pen pals have gone into your wastebasket. Well, I am no quitter, so I am trying again. I am awful lonely and I will answer every letter and even promise a snapshot or photo to each girl who sends me hers. I am six feet two inches tall and bounce the scale one hundred and seventy-five pounds. I came from Argentine five years ago, but was born in Germany. I am thirty years old and wish to hear from girls of all ages under thirty-five. I love all outdoor sports and chess playing, but swimming and tennis are my favorites. I love dancing, too.

Wishing your magazine all the luck and success in the world, I remain

Very truly yours,

HERBERT STEPUTAT.

c/o General Delivery,
Elko, Nev.

LET'S CHEER UP SIS!

Dear Editor:

We are readers of Ranch Romances and think it a fine magazine. I am going to make a request. My sister is bed-fast at the present time and doesn't get very much outside entertainment. Would some of the readers send her old and cancelled stamps? She has started a stamp collection. I am writing this letter to surprise her. She would like to hear from people all over the world, but she cannot promise a reply to all those who write or send her stamps. I will thank you now. I am quite certain that my sister will appreciate your interest very much. Her name is Laura Lambert. Fill her mail-box, please!

Sincerely yours,
ROSELLA LAMBERT.

R.F.D. No. 1,
Central City, Nebr.

WANTED: TALL, SLIM BLONDES

Dear Editor:

I rarely flatter, but I believe in honest praise. I hope you won't think I'm praising Ranch Romances magazine just to get my letter printed on your page! I'm not. But really, I do like the stories very much indeed. Ranch Romances doesn't change like many magazines do. I've read it steadily for several years and still the stories are as good and as interesting as they ever were —if not actually better!

Do you suppose I could find some fairly tall, very slim, blond-haired girls to write to me? I'm an English bachelor, thirty-seven years old and five feet six inches tall. I weigh one hundred and thirty pounds, have blue eyes, and brown hair. I am quiet, cheerful, and good-tempered. I'm fond of the piano and the movies; also reading. Thanking you, I am

Yours truly,
RONALD BURDEN.

R.R. No. 2,
Langley Prairie,
British Columbia, Canada.

HERE'S AN SOS, BOYS!

Dear Editor:

Help! Help! Quick! I'm going under for the third and last time! I'm fighting, but am a goner unless someone will lend a hand. I want pen pals from all over the world. If anyone is looking for a pal, just give me a try. Most people like me, why couldn't you? I promise to answer all letters and exchange snapshots. I am twenty-one years old, have black hair, brown eyes, fair complexion, weigh one hundred and twenty pounds and am five feet four and a half inches tall. I like to make new friends and am always ready for fun.

Sincerely,
"LUCKY."

Lois Hendrix,
Box 62,
Southland, Texas.

WANTED: LOTS OF GIRLS!

Dear Editor:

After having tried unsuccessfully to crash "Our Air Mail" twice, I hope this appeal finally finds a little space in your columns.

We are two lonely C.C.C. boys who have been enlisted in this great project one year. As the nights are long, and there is nothing interesting to do, we would appreciate corresponding with girls, or perhaps I should say young ladies, between the ages of eighteen and twenty-three.

Paul, my pal, is twenty-one years of age and is a country boy. He is five feet ten inches tall, has dark brown hair, brown eyes, and weighs about one hundred and sixty pounds.

I am twenty-three years of age, tall and slim. Although I weigh one hundred and ninety pounds, I am six feet two, so you see, I am not stout. I have dark brown hair, blue eyes and fair skin.

Both of us are very athletic and enjoy all good sports. Paul cares most for dancing, while I enjoy swimming. So come on all you girls, and write to a couple of lonely C.C.C. boys. We would especially like to hear from girls west of the Rockies and south of the Mason and Dixon line. Hoping for the continued success of Ranch Romances, we remain

Very truly yours,
JACK CALAHAN,
PAUL BANDAB.

Company No. 639,
Camp Skokie Valley,
Glenview, Ill.

FORMER FOOTBALL PLAYER

Dear Editor:

This is my first attempt to crash the gates of "Our Air Mail" in a plea for pen pals. I am a former football player, am six feet tall, have black hair and brown eyes, and weigh one hundred eighty pounds. I like dancing, swimming, skating, and sometimes, the movies. Will exchange snaps with all who care to write. Would Nell Carney drop me a line?

Sincerely,
AL.

Alfred Steusloff,
602 Lodge Ave.,
Toledo, Ohio.

SHE HAS JUST ONE WISH!

Dear Editor:

This is my second attempt to crash the gates of "Our Air Mail." Here's hoping something out of the ordinary has thrilled you, so that you'll be in good humor and print this letter.

I am a great lover of the out of doors and Western stories. I wish Ranch Romances came out every day, instead of every two weeks! I have been reading it for two years and I have to tip my hat to it. It sure is grand!

Some folks are given three wishes. I would only need one! I wish that I could spend a few months on a real, honest to goodness ranch (not a dude ranch) and see what it's all about.

I am five feet five inches tall, weigh about one hundred and twenty-five pounds, have blue-gray eyes, black hair and was twenty-five on June seventeenth. Please write!

Sincerely,
HELEN GILSON.

1528 N. 20th St.,
Saginaw, Mich.

AN ENGLISH AUTHORESS WRITES

Dear Editor:

I am anxious to make pen friendships abroad. I would be very glad if you could find space to print my letter in your magazine. I read Ranch Romances and find them excellent reading. I am naturally interested in the stories as I am a writer myself and can better appreciate your literature. I am fond of swimming, tennis and dancing, and I am a lover of outdoor life. I am a city girl, but manage to get into the country for my vacation.

I am in the early twenties, tall, brown-haired, blue-eyed and fair-complexioned. I am very interested in photography and wireless and am an ardent lover of music. I will answer all letters I receive. Wishing you continued success, I am

Sincerely yours,
D. HAMLEY.

25 Webb Road,
Durie Vale,
Wanganui,
New Zealand.

RED-HEADED WIDOW

Dear Editor:

I have been a Ranch Romances' fan for several years. I have tried to crash the gates of "Our Air Mail" before, but they have always been closed. I would like to have pen pals from all over the world. I am a widow, thirty-five years old, red-headed, with blue eyes. I am interested in most everything. Come on, you pen pals, and fill my mail-box!

Yours sincerely,
MRS. ETTA LARREMORE.

R.F.D., Box 312,
Paradise, Calif.

FROM NOVA SCOTIA

Dear Editor:

Is there room enough in your circle for another one? I have been reading Ranch Romances for a number of years and think it is a splendid magazine. I would like to have some pen pals from everywhere to write to me. I have lots of spare time and will answer all letters. I am a female of the species, aged twenty-three, have green eyes and light brown hair. That doesn't sound very prepossessing, does it? But just write to me, pals, and see how quickly I will answer. I will exchange snaps and views.

Wishing your magazine every success, I remain

Sincerely yours,
OLIVE TIDESWELL.

169 Brunswick St.
Halifax, Nova Scotia,
Canada.

SICK-A-BED GIRL

Dear Editor:

I am a girl, seventeen years old. I have hazel eyes and brown, curly hair. At present I recline in a bed instead of being outdoors enjoying sports.

I would like to hear from boys and girls between the ages of sixteen and twenty. I find it necessary to have an outlet for my energy—one which doesn't require much physical exertion. Writing appeals to me because it can be done in bed, so I am asking for lots of pen pals. I read Ranch Romances constantly and I wish the magazine continued success.

Sincerely,
"REA."

Marie Kolenbrander,
Sunshine Sanitarium,
Grand Rapids, Mich.

FROM A WELSH GIRL

Dear Editor:

I must write and congratulate you on publishing Ranch Romances. I think it is by far the best magazine on the market. I do so enjoy reading the stories because they are all good, clean ones, and certainly very interesting.

I have been reading the magazine for some time now but have never written to you before for pen pals. I am very lonesome. I am a Welsh girl working in England, many miles from home. I am five feet four inches in height, weigh one hundred and twenty-four pounds, and have black hair and hazel gray eyes. I am fond of boating, skating, cycling and rambling. Anyone who likes my description, please write. I make a promise to answer all letters and exchange snaps with all who write. I forgot to mention my age: I am twenty-eight.

Sincerely yours,
RUTH GOODWIN.

The Hydro,
Swan Road,
Harrogate, Yorkshire,
England.

DOWN IN THE LAND O' COTTON

Dear Editor:

I am just a fourteen-year-old girl living on a great cotton ranch in the dear old State of Texas, and I am looking for pen pals—boys and girls from all over the world. I have wavy, brown hair with just a trace of red in it, brown eyes, and I am five feet three inches in height. I weigh one hundred pounds.

Come on, boys and girls, and cheer up a lonesome ranch girl by writing her loads of letters!

Sincerely yours,
EDNA EARLE COOK.

Thornton, Texas.

ATTENTION, WEST VIRGINIANS!

Dear Editor:

This is the third time I have written to your department. I want to state that I'll answer every single letter I receive, if it's from China and it takes me until I'm a century old to do it. I should love to have some of you good-looking West Virginia boys write to me, as this is my state and I may be fortunate enough to meet some of you some day. But anyone is welcome—old or young, slim or fat—it doesn't matter! If anyone is interested, here is a little description of myself: blond hair, blue-gray eyes, wavy hair, one hundred seventeen pounds in weight.

Will Rufus E. Blair, "The Wandering Yank," please write?

I'll say, "Adios mio amigos," until I hear from you.

Yours most sincerely,
"BLONDIE."

Mae Richmond,
319½ Summers St.
Hinton, West Va.

WHERE, OH WHERE, ARE THE COWBOYS?

Dear Editor:

I have been reading Ranch Romances for some time and think it grand. I like cowboys and the West, so here I am asking for pen pals from out there. I hope to have my mail-box filled so please don't disappoint me.

Here is a brief description of myself: I have dark, brown, curly hair, brown eyes, and light complexion. I am five feet five and one-half inches tall. I go to high school.

Please write soon, girls and boys!

Adios,
MARGARET PEASLEY.

R.F.D. 1,
Salisbury, Conn.

HE LIKES 'EM SERIOUS

Dear Editor:

I would appreciate it very much if it were possible to correspond with one of the finer and more serious types of young women interested in the higher things of life—one of ideals, a fair education and over twenty years of age.

I have been doing accounting work for the last nine years. My hobbies are golf, motoring, good books and music. Thanking you, I am

Very truly yours,
JOHN MURRAY, JR.

Box 1453,
Middletown, N. Y.

LITTLE BOY LOST

Dear Editor:

I have just gone through your magazine from cover to cover and see only one thing the matter with it. That is, if it were just twice as large as it is, it would be O.K.

I am asking for pen pals from all over the world. I am a Texan and lost in California, but can tell you a lot about the old Lone Star State.

For description, I am twenty-six years old, have light brown hair, blue eyes and weigh one hundred forty-five pounds. I am five feet six and one-half inches tall. I will exchange snaps and I promise to answer all letters I receive.

"TEX."

Delmo Garner, Apt. 4,
1103 Mahanna Ave.
Long Beach, Calif.

LONELY RANCHER

Dear Editor:

Come on now and give a lonely Alberta rancher a chance to get some pen pals. I have been buying Ranch Romances for three years, and it's my best silent friend. I have traveled around a lot and can tell some interesting things about this wonderful Province. So come on, Ye Ranchers and Ranch Girls from all over the globe and fill a lonely rancher's mail-box. For the first six who write there will be a surprise.

I am six feet one inch tall, have brown, wavy hair, brown eyes and am twenty-three years old. Wishing Ranch Romances every success, I am

Yours sincerely,
J. J. TELESKY.

Thorsley,
Alberta, Canada.

RADIOGRAM

Dear Editor:

Here is a radiogram for you:

Am destitute for pen pals stop gladly exchange snapshots of myself stop like polo and wrestling stop am twenty-two years old five feet tall comma blue eyes comma brown hair stop like have pen pals all over world stop my address medical detachment comma Fort Kamehameh, T. H. stop sincerely

(Signed) BENJAMIN J. DUCHARM.

Handled by Radio W2ELK 178 Hicks St.,
Brooklyn, N. Y.

A MICHIGAN COLLEGE GIRL

Dear Editor:

I am a college girl who gets so much enjoyment from reading this column that I would even take time off from my studies if anyone would be kind enough to write to me. I promise to answer all letters received and exchange snapshots. I participate in practically every sport that versatile Michigan offers.

I have noticed that very few Michigan people have written to this department of your magazine, so think it is time for one of us to remedy that situation.

Best luck to Ranch Romances!

LOUISA ALEXANDER.

Mt. Pleasant,
Mich.

HER ADDRESS IS O. K., FOLKS

Dear Editor:

This is my second attempt to get pen pals. If I don't get my letter printed pretty soon, I'm going to be very disappointed! I am five feet three inches tall, weigh one hundred and nine pounds, have coal-black hair, brownish-gray eyes, and my hobby is song-collecting. Please give me some pen pals.

Sincerely yours,
PAULA SUTTON.

OKay, Ark.

Trail's End Roll Call

Meet the following new Trail's Enders:

Mr. H. S. Baldwin, Fornham St., Martin, Bury, St. Edmunds, England.

Mrs. Grace Beidler, R. R. 1, Clayton, Wash.

Mr. E. R. Busbin, Box 142, Jasper, Alberta, Canada.

Mrs. Dorothy Cooper, Box 583, Hyannis, Mass.

Mrs. E. J. Corliss, 1512 Nostrand Ave., Brooklyn, N. Y.

Miss Virginia Davison, Brown St., R. 5, Jamestown, N. Y.

Miss Audrey Dixon, 262 Spring St., Newport, R. I.

Mr. Andrew R. Dynum, Co. 1354, C. C. C. State Camp No. 92, Asaph, Penn.

Miss Jacqueline Folis, R. 2, Byhalia, Miss.

Mr. Roy E. Freeto, East Burke, Vt.

Miss Edna Fussee, Dunnville, Ontario, Canada.

Miss Ruth H. Gorman, 437 Bonnie Brae St., Los Angeles, Calif.

Miss Helen F. Gilson, 1528 N. 20 St., Saginaw, Mich.

Mr. Joe Glennen, 1033 Yuma St., Denver, Colo.

Mr. Glenn Hagan, 809 East Second Ave., Gastonia, N. C.

Mr. Albert Hurlbutt, R. R. 3, Buchanan, Mich.

Miss Kathryn Hutchinson, R. 4, Box 91, Lena, Wis.

Miss Evelyn Johnson, 830 Sixteenth St., Moline, Ill.

Mr. Jervis Justis, Box 124, Hartford, W. Va.

Miss Rose Kayamoto, 1794 Davis St., San Leandra, Calif.

Miss Helen Landgraf, 507—14th St., S. E. Canton, Ohio.

Mr. Gorge Leidy, R. D. 2, Barberton, Ohio.

Mr. Lucky McFall, Jr., Escalon, Calif.

Miss Leona Motta, 1032 Stafford Rd., Fall River, Mass.

Mr. J. B. Reynolds, Coast Guard Station, Montauk, N. Y.

Miss Joy Rodifer, 455—65th St., Oakland, Calif.

Mr. Bill Titus, P. O. Box 773, Newmen, Calif.

Mr. Roland Trout, R. R. 2, Mangum, Okla.

Mr. Fred Von Rotz, 3005 Franklin Blvd., Sacramento., Calif.

Miss Ruth Webster, Enfield, Mass.

142

TRAIL'S END MEMBERSHIP COUPON

I am a regular reader of RANCH ROMANCES.

I want to become a member of Trail's End Club.

(*Miss*)
(*Mrs.*)
(*Mr.*)

Address .....

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Three *successive* coupons make you a member of America's greatest outdoor club.

Ten cents brings you the lovely "Trail's End" pin.

You must be a member to secure the pin.

Please *print* your name and address plainly.

Whom Shall I Marry?

BY PROFESSOR MARCUS MARI

AUGUST

VIRGO

VIRGO governs after August twenty-second. These people are tireless students and workers, logical, and essentially practical in their temperaments.

It is very difficult to deceive them, as their minds are swift to see through deception and humbug of any kind. They have a high regard for truth, and justice is a religion with them. They have a keen sense of responsibility and their consciences, in all matters of duty and responsibility, whether in business, in the community or in their home life, is remarkably sensitive.

They are usually lovers of art, literature, and music, and are severe critics. Unfortunately, this extreme tendency to criticise sometimes develops into sarcastic criticism of everything and everyone, and makes them rather difficult associates or friends. However, the majority of Virgo people have too much poise, kindliness and fairness to permit their critical habit of mind to lead them into becoming perpetual grumblers.

They are generally charming people, quick of wit, generous, affectionate and take a lively interest in anything going on in the world about them.

It is essential for the happiness of Virgo people that they be careful in the choice of mates and friends. They will find congenial companions in the signs of Taurus and Capricorn

Professor Mari will be glad to give a personal reading to any reader who sends in the coupon. Address him in care of Ranch Romances, 578 Madison Ave., New York.

Name ..... Sex.....

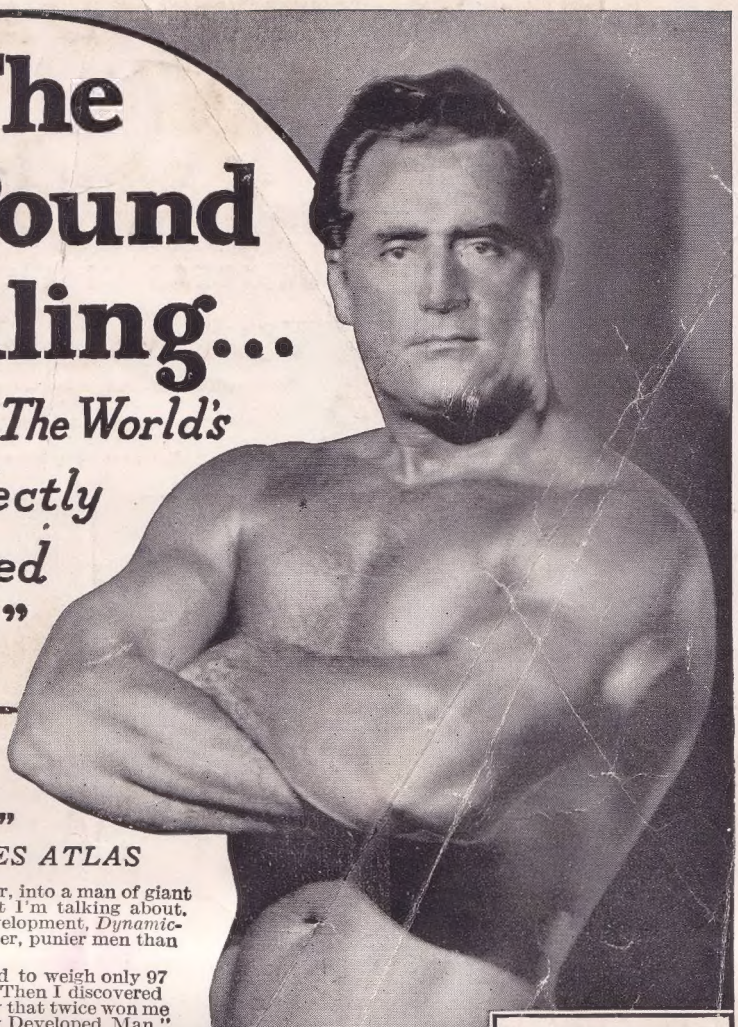
Address.....

Exact date of birth: Year.....Month.....Date.....

Always use this coupon and enclose stamped and self-addressed envelope. 8-24-34

The 97-Pound Weakling...

who became "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man"



"I'll Prove to You in 7 Days that YOU, too, Can be This NEW MAN!"

—CHARLES ATLAS

WHEN I say I can make you over, into a man of giant power and energy, I know what I'm talking about. I've seen my new system of body development, *Dynamic-Tension*, transform hundreds of weaker, punier men than you into Atlas Champions.

Take myself, for instance. I used to weigh only 97 pounds! I was a sickly scare-crow. Then I discovered *Dynamic-Tension*. It gave me a body that twice won me the title "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man." It can work just as big a change in you, too! I'm so sure of it that I make you this amazing offer: At my own risk I'll give you PROOF in just seven days that I can make you over into this NEW MAN. I'll begin training you *on approval*. If you don't notice a marvelous change in yourself *within a week* it won't cost you one cent.

No "if's," "ands," or "maybes." Just tell me where you want handsome, powerful muscles. Are you fat and flabby? Or skinny and gawky? Are you short-winded, pepless? Do you hold back and let others walk off with the prettiest girls, best jobs, etc.? Give me just 7 days! I'll PROVE to you that I can make you a healthy, confident, powerful HE-MAN.

Dynamic-Tension is an entirely NATURAL method. No mechanical weights or pulleys to strain your heart and other vital organs. No pills, special foods, or unnatural dieting. Only a few minutes of your spare time daily is enough to show amazing results—and it's actually fun! *Dynamic-Tension does the work.*

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Mail the coupon right now for full details and I'll send you my illustrated book, "Everlasting Health and Strength." Tells all about my "*Dynamic-Tension*" methods. Shows actual photos of men I've made into Atlas Champions. Supplies the facts you need to know about *your* condition. It's a valuable book! And it's FREE. Send for your copy *today*. Mail the coupon to me personally. CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 9-H, 133 East 23rd Street, New York City.

NOTE:

No other Physical Instructor in the World has ever DARED make such an offer!

CHARLES ATLAS
Dept. 9-H
133 East 23rd Street, New York City

I want the proof that your system of "Dynamic-Tension" will make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscular development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength." This request places me under no obligation.

Name.....
(Please print or write plainly)

Address.....

City..... State.....

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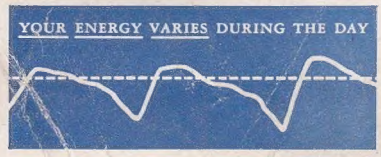
A FACT!

SCIENCE ADVANCES NEW DATA THAT MAY COMPLETELY CHANGE YOUR IDEAS OF CIGARETTES!



Experience of Camel Smokers Confirmed

Here's a basic discovery that throws new light on our past knowledge about cigarettes. It embodies an "energizing effect" . . . a quick restoration of the flow of natural body energy . . . a relief from fatigue and irritability. You do "get a lift with a Camel," and it is a pleasure that you can repeat as often as you like—all day long. For Camels never get on your nerves.

CAMELS can literally relieve fatigue and irritability

Are you irritable and fussy when tired? Then light a Camel. As you enjoy its cool, rich flavor, you will quickly feel your flow of natural energy being restored.

EFFECT IS NATURAL

The effect is produced by Camels in a wholly natural and utterly delightful way. So, whenever you feel run-down, tired and irritable, just smoke a Camel. You can smoke just as many of these delightful Camels as you want. You can increase the flow of energy over and over again. And remember: *Camel's costlier tobaccos never get on your nerves.*

CAMEL'S COSTLIER TOBACCOS NEVER GET ON YOUR NERVES!

Camels are made from finer, MORE EXPENSIVE TOBACCOS—Turkish & Domestic—than any other popular brand.

KNOW THIS FEELING? Too "all in" to respond to the gaiety of the crowd? That's one of the many times to light a Camel and enjoy its rich flavor while your flow of healthful energy is restored. You will *like* Camels . . . a matchless blend of costlier tobaccos!

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"Get a LIFT with a Camel!"